

“FATE MUST FIND SOMEONE TO SPEAK THROUGH”:
CHRISTIANITY, RAGNARÖK, AND THE LOSS OF ICELANDIC INDEPENDENCE
IN THE EYES OF THE ICELANDERS AS ILLUSTRATED BY *GÍSLA SAGA*
SÚRSSONAR

A
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Abstract

Iceland surrendered political control to the Norwegian monarchy in 1262, but immediately resented their choice. The sagas about reliance on the Norwegians, clearly illustrating that the Icelanders knew where this path was leading them. *Gísla Saga* is a particularly interesting text to examine in light of the contemporaneous political climate, as it takes place in the years leading up to the conversion but was written between the conversion and the submission to Norwegian rule. Though *Gísla* does not explicitly comment on either the conversion or the increase in Norwegian influence, close examination illuminates ambiguity in the portrayal of Christian and pagan characters and a general sense of terminal foreboding.

This subtle commentary becomes clearer when one reads *Gísla Saga* in light of the story of Ragnarök, the death of the gods and the end of the Norse world. Characters and images in *Gísla Saga* may be compared with the events of Ragnarök, the apocalyptic battle between the Æsir and the giants, illustrating how the Christian conversion and Norwegian submission brought about the end of Iceland's golden age by destroying the last home of the Norse gods. In order to closely compare the events of *Gísla Saga* with those of Ragnarök, I have chosen to work with the final battle as it is described in the *Voluspá*, or *The Prophecy of the Seeress*, one of the Elder Edda, of which I have translated the *Codex Regis* and *Hauksbók* manuscript versions, in order to deal closely and specifically with the text. Finally I discuss images of Ragnarök, as it is told in the *Voluspá*, which appear in *Gísla*, drawing close the ties between Christianization and

Norwegian rule and the ways in which Icelanders recognized this conversion as the end of their world.

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Introduction

The story of Iceland's first few hundred years is a fascinating one. Establishing themselves as an arbitrated cohesive nation with more in common with modern democracies than contemporary monarchies, the Icelanders set themselves culturally far apart even from Norway, their closest peer and the point of origin for most settling in Iceland. While Iceland followed many Norwegian conventions, the Icelanders considered themselves a nation wholly apart from Norway and tended to think of themselves as superior to the Norwegians. As Norway went through various cultural changes – including its conversion to Christianity – which increased common ground between Norway and the rest of Europe, Iceland remained staunchly traditional. However, in the year one thousand Iceland bowed to economic pressure from the Norwegian king and declared Christianity the state religion. Then, in a desperate action in the face of regional squabbles, Iceland surrendered political control to the Norwegian monarchy in 1262. Iceland remained a territory until 1918, when Norway broke free from Sweden¹.

The Icelanders immediately began to resent the resulting Norwegian rule and thoroughly regretted their choice. Their forced religious conversion was the first step towards their eventual submission. As Norwegians controlled the organization of the

¹Iceland was not solely a pawn of Norway all this time, but it was the Iclander's original surrender to Norway which led to their being passed around like pocket change for the next six centuries or so.

Icelandic church, outsiders dictating the Icelanders' immensely personal spiritual affairs, Norwegians were in a position to influence most aspects of the Icelandic life, both public and private. The sagas contain both explicit and implicit warnings about the dangers of reliance on the Norwegians, clearly illustrating that the Icelanders knew where this path was leading them. *Gísli Saga* is a particularly interesting text to examine in light of the contemporaneous political climate, as it takes place in the years leading up to the conversion but was written between the conversion and the submission to Norwegian rule. Though *Gísli* does not explicitly comment on either the conversion or the increase in Norwegian influence, close examination illuminates ambiguity in the portrayal of Christian and pagan characters and a general sense of terminal foreboding.

This subtle commentary becomes clearer when one reads *Gísli Saga* in light of the story of Ragnarök, the death of the gods and the end of the Norse world. Characters and images in *Gísli Saga* may be compared with the events of Ragnarök, the apocalyptic battle between the Æsir and the giants, illustrating how the Christian conversion and Norwegian submission brought about the end of Iceland's golden age by destroying the last home of the Norse gods². In order to closely compare the events of *Gísli Saga* with those of Ragnarök, I have chosen to work with the final battle as it is described in the *Voluspá*, or *The Prophecy of the Seeress*, one of the Elder Edda. The *Voluspá* is paramount to this discussion because it is one of the primary sources for the narrative of

²This comparison of contemporaneous events with Ragnarök is not alien or irreverent to the Norse themselves. An anonymous Scandinavian mathematician referred to WWI as Ragnarök ("Reprint" 485) in a 1931 article.

Ragnarök and because two significantly different manuscript versions have survived, one in the *Codex Regis*, or *Konungsbók* in Icelandic, and one in *Hauksbók*. These manuscripts differ significantly from one another in both narrative and chronology, but all available English translations combine the two, often without noting which material comes from which manuscript. In order to deal closely and specifically with the text I have included my own translation of each manuscript in Appendix A. Also, as most discussions of the *Voluspá* lump the texts together, I have included a summary of the similarities and differences between the texts in my discussion of Ragnarök. Finally I discuss images of Ragnarök, as it is told in the *Voluspá*, which appear in *Gísli*, drawing close the ties between Christianization and Norwegian rule and the ways in which Icelanders recognized this conversion as the end of their world.

I begin with a brief discussion of the formulation of the Icelandic nation and the circumstances surrounding their conversion to Christianity to provide the reader with a general sense of the history involved. This is followed by an exploration of how *Gísli Saga* relates to these events, focusing on temporal evidence, though also including a discussion of the relative Norseness or Christianity of Gísli's behavior. I then expand this discussion of Christian or Norse indicators to the debate over Gísli's dream-women. In the following chapter I discuss characters who are explicitly described as Christian or pagan and their relative degree of narrative sympathy. Shifting towards Ragnarök, my discussion of the *Voluspá* focuses on the likeliness of Christian influence, particularly in explaining differences between the manuscripts, and the shift in the portrayal of Loki and

Balder, two pivotal characters who synecdochically reflect larger changes in the text. I lay out signs and portents of Ragnarök as found in the *Voluspá* and compare them to the events in *Gísli Saga*. I discuss Gísli's similarities to both Baldr and Loki while fleshing out parallels between good and evil, friends and foes in *Gísli Saga* and the gods and giants as presented in the *Voluspá*. Finally I discuss images of Ragnarök, as they are described in the *Voluspá*, which appear in *Gísli*, drawing close the ties between Christianization and Norwegian rule and the ways in which Icelanders recognized this conversion as the end of their world.

Chapter Two: Cohesion to Conversion: Iceland as a Nation

Icelanders from the beginning would be able to accomplish peacefully what monarchies had arrived at only belatedly and despite their rulers.

Jochens “Late and Peaceful” 651

To discuss the impact of Iceland's annexation into Norway we must first look at what differentiated Iceland from Norway. It seems reasonable to consider the birth of Iceland as a nation – the point at which Icelanders began to consider themselves different from their Norwegian ancestors and shift from a collection of individual farms and families into a whole if not more cohesive than at least more willing to follow the same laws and present a united front – to have occurred in 930 with the institution of the first Icelandic constitution (Jochens “Late and Peaceful” 629). The conversion of Iceland as a nation to Christianity occurred 70 years later, at or around the year 1000.³ We know that the conversion was, as Zoë Brovsky puts it, “[u]ndoubtedly” considered by the Icelanders themselves to be a shaping force in Iceland’s history (7) because several reasonably contemporaneous accounts survived, strongly suggesting that other accounts existed, both oral and written, which were not preserved. The Icelandic conversion came far after other Europeans had abandoned paganism, as Iceland was the last of the Scandinavian countries to declare Christianity the national religion. Denmark converted in the early tenth century, closely followed by Norway and Sweden (Jochens “Late and Peaceful” 621), but even Denmark was far behind the curve when compared to the rest of Europe.

In each of the three other Scandinavian nations the conversion to Christianity was violent, quite literally “spearheaded by kings” (Jochens 621). Interestingly, while the

³ Some scholars argue as to the exact date, but few consider any year before 999 or after 1001.

Norwegian monarch Ólaf Trygggvason forced his own people to convert under both threat and execution of violence (653), he used the much more unusual leverage of trade to pressure the Icelanders, arguing that his good Christian subjects should not “besmirch their faith” by trading with the pagan Icelanders (644, note 107). When this strategy didn’t immediately bring results, he banned Norwegian ships from sailing to Iceland, effectively cutting them off from both trade with and supplies from the mainland, simultaneously causing the Icelanders to fear a Norwegian invasion; he also took hostage four Icelandic youths who were visiting the Norwegian court (653).⁴

In Norway, as before in Denmark and later in Sweden, conversion was strictly a top down affair. The King decided to adopt the new religion and then mandated his decision with both legislation and violence. As John T. Flint discusses in “The Secularization of Norwegian Society,” the violent Scandinavian missionary kings morphed into religious leaders and enforcers, functioning as both political and religious heads of state until their countries became recognized as archdioceses by the larger Church – in the middle of the twelfth century for Norway (331-32). Christianity trickled down, first from the King, and then from the chieftains of individual areas, who accepted baptism themselves while promising to eliminate pagan worship in their region. Direct relationship between a chieftain’s religion and that of those of his region can be seen in

⁴ Jochens provides an excellent and thorough summary of the Icelandic conversion story in “Late and Peaceful: Iceland’s Conversion through Arbitration in 1000” (647).

the boundaries of legal districts, comparing the areas served by pagan temples and with the delineations of later Christian dioceses.

In Iceland, however, there was no king to take that initial step of personal conversion; the Icelanders would have to come to some kind of consensus. Seeing this as an advantage, Icelanders grasped this opportunity to outdo their mainland counterparts. Iceland succeeded in a national conversion without widespread violence precisely because its legal and political system required its citizens to sit down, talk about the issue, and agree to take the word of a moderator. Þorgeirr, the most eloquent and effective advocate of arbitration in Ari Þorgilsson's famous early twelfth century account, emphasized the tension created by the Icelandic people's reluctance to follow the same laws (as some things were legal for pagans but not for Christians or vice versa) and used the religious violence in Norway and Denmark to illustrate the outcome of continued legal dichotomy. According to Ari, Þorgeirr advised: "and let all have one law and one faith. It will prove true, if we break the law in pieces, then we break the peace in pieces too"(108).⁵

Þorgeirr emphasized that only through discussion and arbitration would Icelanders be able to enact a peaceful conversion, where as their monarchical cousins had done so only over a great span of time and despite their kings (Jochens "Late and Peaceful" 651). The internal and personal conversion of individual Icelanders is referred to as *siðaskipti*, the *skipti*, or transformation of *sið*, religion and culture, while the

⁵Translation Gwyn Jones, "Islendingabok," *The Norse Atlantic Saga*.

superficial political conversion is referred to as the *kristnitaka*, literally, the taking of Christianity (Jochens 621-22). Wax and Wax humorously point out that what was theoretically a massive change in theology and practice for all of Iceland was marked by nothing more than a few eloquent speeches at the *þing* and a mild burble from a volcano near the *þing* field (7).

While bowing to Norwegian pressure to convert did secure Iceland favorable trade conditions, regain her hostages, and ward off, at least for the moment, any real or imagined threat of Norwegian invasion⁶, the conversion also opened Iceland up to further Norwegian influence and eventual control. In 1262 (Smiley xiv) the Icelanders surrendered political power to the Norwegians, but the stage for this submission had been set by the Norwegian structuring of the Icelandic church. Iceland's legal and political system was originally patterned after that of Norway, but gave even more power to the *goðar*, who provided super-kin leadership at the regional level (Flint 326).

Goðar are often thought of as equivalent to chieftain, but Old Norse society had both chieftain and *goðar*, who held overlapping roles. As John Flint notes, “[a]ll *goði* are chieftains, but not all chieftains are *goði*” (328). The greatest difference between a chieftain and a *goði* is the *goði*'s explicit relationship to religion. Even the word points to the position's religious nature, beginning as it does with the word “*goð*” – the Old Norse

⁶Jochens points out that “At this stage Icelanders may not have fully appreciated the protecting isolation of their homeland and may have feared not only for the four youths in Norway, but may also have imagined a full-scale Norwegian invasion. According to *Laxdæla saga* Óláfr prohibited Norwegian ships from sailing to Iceland [. . .], perhaps as an alternative to or a first step toward invasion.” (“Late and Peaceful” 653).

neuter form of god (Jochens “Late and Peaceful” 630). Goðar are not, however, strictly priests. As Mary Williams points out, no priest class existed in Scandinavia at all prior to Christianity; “In matters in which only himself was concerned, the Northman ‘met his gods alone’” (379).⁷ The goði led communal worship, which concerned such matters as affected the community as a whole. There is no sense, as there was in the Catholic Church, that the goði was needed as an intermediary between a Norse individual and the gods.

On both the religious and political fields a goði’s power was organized regionally, with each chieftain owning his own temple, where he was responsible for performing rituals, and which served households in his area who chose to accept his authority (Flint 328-30). This relationship between religion and social order is apparent in the geographical correspondence between ðing locations and important places of worship, which suggests a religious oversight or sanction for legal actions and explains the religious nature of punishment for disrupting a ðing. ðing meetings also contained ritual components performed by the goði, reinforcing the connection between religious expectation and societal necessity.

Goðar in Iceland had great power, greater even than their counterparts in Norway who began the practice. Still, this high level of power doesn’t seem to have been often

⁷ Flint, however, argues for the possibility that Goðar originated as a priestly class, but that “Toward the end of the Viking age this stratum gradually lost its autonomy, absorbed by the political order in the chieftain office. And, finally, by the end of the Viking age when culture contact and power demands pressed, the religious role was reduced to a minor element in the chieftains’ office” (331).

abused. Williams accounts for this by pointing out that a goði's jurisdiction was over people rather than territory, and was voluntary not imposed (379). If one disagreed with the rule of his or her goði, all that was necessary was to change allegiances. In practical terms, this might have required moving, but a person was not tied to a particular goði based on his or her residence or stead; the relationship had to be accepted by both parties. Similarly, the goði had no power nor any agents to enforce his decisions or the conclusions of the Althing or a þing; that was left in the hands of individuals and their kin, who were given approval but not assistance by the assembly (Flint 329-30). The assembly itself was the real seat of power in the Icelandic system, and one could be a lawman, pleading his case or representing at the þing, without being a goði or a chieftain.

Brovsky asserts that the relationship between secular and religious stature was so intertwined that the bishops of Iceland were made members of the *Lögrétta*, Iceland's lawmaking body, and participants in the þing (13-14), even though some of them were foreign. Similarly, Norse chieftains either became ordained priests or had their sons ordained. Jochens argues that ambitious men, both Christian and pagan, who were outside of the closed circle already in power, lobbied equally for a change in the religious landscape ("Late and Peaceful" 653), though they were more interested in its political implications than its religious importance. Shifting the base of religious power from pagans to Christians caused an equal shift in secular political power.⁸ Becoming a

⁸It also shifted the political balance of the sexes, as women held a strong place in Norse mystical traditions – prophets, for instance, were almost exclusively women (Jochens "Old Norse Magic" 306) – but were allotted only subservient positions in the Christian hierarchy (307). This change is reflected in post-Christian portrayals of magic, with the gift of prophesy held only by men in some later sagas, which seems

Christian priest brought political power where it had previously been inaccessible to people outside the hereditary circle of goði and chieftains. Hence, by dictating the structure of the newly forming Icelandic church, the Norwegians also strongly influenced the division of secular authority.

Unification reduced the authority of those inside the inner circle of goðar and chieftains; by definition, unification of Iceland as a nation could only occur through the submission of the ruling class (hersir and goðar) to a national king (Flint 327-28). The conversion removed the ritual content of the goðar's activities, bolstering this political subversion and further reducing the scope of the goðar's influence. The political submission of Iceland to the Norwegians only furthered this trend, moving power away from the sacred, kinship-based goðar and threatening Icelandic autonomy both religiously and secularly (Borovsky 14).

Just prior to the submission of Icelandic political control to the Norwegian monarchy, Icelanders seem to have been of two minds about how to react to this Norwegian cultural invasion (Borovsky 7). Some believed that Iceland must be open to change or risk being left behind by the more cosmopolitan mainlanders, while others focused on *forneskja*, or the "good old days" (Jones *Four Icelandic* 13), staunchly maintaining that Icelandic culture must be preserved from Norwegian influence. This debate is apparent in contemporaneous Icelandic literature. In *Sturlunga Saga*, for

to indicate that Christianity shifted the Norse view of gender and power, refusing to acknowledge the power of women even when that power is classified as evil.

example, the mythic Guðrun, praised for her violent pursuance of traditional Norse values,⁹ refers to the Icelandic submission as subjugation to King Hakon, and prophesies that, having once given him control, Icelanders will be unable to wrench their freedom back from Hakon's sons (Borovsky 26).

A similarly anti-Christian, anti-Norwegian sentiment underlies the conversion scene of *Njáls Saga*, where the pagan priestess Steinunn initiates a flyting, a traditional Norse insult contest, against Þangbrandr, the incredibly unsympathetic German missionary sent by the Norwegian crown to convert the Icelanders – and oh, does Steinunn flyte him! Steinunn first suggests that Christ is cowardly, too afraid to accept a duel from Thor. Then, when Þangbrandr fails to rise to that bait Steinunn raises the emotional bar by attacking Þangbrandr and his Christ in verse:

It was Thor's giant-killing hammer
 That smashed the ocean-striding Bison;
 It was our gods who drove
 The bell-ringer's boat ashore.
 Your Christ could not save
 This buffalo of the sea from destruction;
 I do not think your God

⁹ Guðrun kills her children, feeding them to her husband Atli before killing him as well, in retaliation for Atli's murder of her brothers. By choosing to avenge her blood kin (her brothers) against her kin by marriage (her husband and their children – considered by the Norse to be members of the husband's family, but not the wife's) Guðrun upholds Norse standards of loyalty and obligation.

Kept guard over him at all. ¹⁰ (222)

By asserting first that Thor is proved stronger than Christ by destroying the ship carrying Christ's missionary,¹¹ and then questioning whether Þangbrandr is favored by Christ at all, Steinunn publicly humiliates Þangbrandr and raises the issue of whether a god who sends a man like Þangbrandr as his messenger should be considered in any case. Perhaps Christ did not truly send Þangbrandr, or perhaps He did not feel that Þangbrandr or his mission of converting the Icelanders were important enough to intercede on his behalf. Although Þangbrandr does succeed in his mission, prompting some to convert, he loses this social battle, as Steinunn has the last word and wins the flyting. The saga writer, it seems, is also quietly rooting for Steinunn, as he quotes her directly, allowing the power of her rhetoric to speak for itself, though he falls short of explicitly siding with the pagan priestesses (11). By confronting a missionary of the Norwegian crown on undeniably Norse terms, using public mocking and the traditional form of flyting, Steinunn not only holds fast to her pagan traditions, but illustrates how traditional Icelandic practices and subversive texts can be used as weapons against the Christian Norwegian monarchy (10).

Though Icelanders were originally Norwegian settlers, they strove to distance themselves from their Norwegian cousins. Norway, in turn, exerted a slow but steady pressure on the Icelanders, using the economy to influence them religiously and religious hierarchy to influence them politically. Even as the Icelanders accepted Christianity as

¹⁰ Trans. by Magnusson and Pálsson

¹¹ Though Thor is not the god of the seas per se, he is the god sailors traditionally prayed to and held accountable for weather at sea.

their new religion, they were aware of its secular Norwegian backing and suspicious of its political and cultural motivations. This dichotomous view of Norwegian versus Icelandic culture encouraged both the preservation of Icelandic stories and heroes in the face of increasing Norwegian influence and the conflicted view of their Norwegian relations, past and future, seen in the sagas.

Chapter Three: *Gísli* as an Illustrative Saga

Medieval Icelandic literature is different from almost every other world literature – it is a literature in which individual authors seem to disappear, while the voice of an entire way of life seems to speak distinctly.

Smiley xii

Sagas are a particularly fascinating genre of literature because they claim to give us a window into the Icelandic past from a near but not contemporary view. As very few of the sagas are written about contemporaneous events, what the sagas provide for us is not simply a slice of medieval Icelandic life but a commentary on that life, Icelanders judging themselves and their past by their current situation, attempting to square what

was with what is. Borovsky argues that the explicit purpose of the sagas is to present the past to their audience in a way which resonates with their daily lives, to provide a space in which to relate their history with both their present and their future (7). The ways in which conversion era sagas discuss the conversion and its Norwegian backers illustrate how Icelanders saw Christianity in their lives and subtly illuminates the ways in which they saw Norway taking hold.

Folklorists and anthropologists have used the sagas not only as sources of legends, lore, and daily life, but also to document Iceland's shift from an oral pagan nation to a literate Christian one. Borovsky argues that this transition to Christianity aligned with the transition from an orally focused culture to a literally focused one, so that "[l]iterate individuals and groups could therefore become alienated from (or deliberately distance themselves from) their past and cultural heritage" (11).¹² It seems, however, that the shift – not the wholly pagan past nor Christian present – is what most interested the Icelandic authors. Elizabeth Ashman Rowe notes that the conversion story remained a flourishing genre well into the fourteenth century, fully three hundred years after the conversion of Iceland (427). While some of this continued focus can be explained by the temporal distance between the *kristnitaka* and *siðaskipti*, it seems that, overall, the Icelanders are far more interested in the liminal space, the moment of

¹² This shift also served to more emphatically exclude women from the new Icelandic order. Borovsky points out that converting the typically, but *not* exclusively male role of chieftain or *goði* into the exclusively male role of the Catholic priest creates a "male –centered vernacular Christianity" (13-14), shutting women out of both the religious and public/ legal spheres, both altering and limiting the socio-political landscape.

transition, than they are in the outcome of that change. I suggest that the impetus behind this emphasis on transition is the Icelandic awareness that in many ways the conversion to Christianity launches the loss of Icelandic independence; it is the beginning of the end.

Gisli is a particularly fascinating example of saga writing as it relates to the Icelandic conversion, as it is, in essence, bound up in this time of transition. *Gísla Saga Súrssonar*,¹³ Örnólfur Thorsson asserts, was composed in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, while the action takes place between 940 and 980 (497). The saga author, therefore, was viewing transition from two directions: the narrative action deals with the fifty or so years leading up to the *kristnitaka*, while the narrative itself was written after the conversion in the years leading up to the submission of Icelandic political control to the Norwegians. This crucial time of composition allows for both an evaluation of how Christianity has affected the culture of Iceland and an awareness of where Iceland is heading as a nation. Even if the author were unaware of the future loss of autonomy, he would surely be aware of the growing hostilities between kin groups and *goðar*. It is the inability of groups of Icelanders to work together as a whole that eventually led them to relinquish control to the Norwegians, with all groups answering to the Norwegian king.

While *Gisli* rarely comments directly on the merits of either Christianity or Norse paganism, we can examine the portraits of characters who mark themselves as either

¹³ Unless otherwise noted I am using Martin S. Regal's translation of the shorter text, AM 556 a 4to, original provided in *Íslendinga sögur II* (Reykjavík 1987).

pagan or Christian, as well as the narrative results provided for pagan or Christian characters or behaviors which are depicted in the saga. Gísli is a tremendously complex character, and it is sometimes hard for a modern audience to judge his motives. As Lars Lönnroth puts it, though Gísli certainly shines when compared to his “cowardly brother” Thorkel, it is difficult to discern whether Gísli is fundamentally a white hat or a black hat, hero or anti-hero; “when we come to the end of the saga, we cannot really tell whether he died for a just cause” (462).

A great deal of discussion, unsurprisingly, has centered on whether Gísli himself is Christian or pagan. An argument can certainly be made that Gísli is Christian or converts over the course of the saga. The text provides two instances of Gísli performing actions that could suggest a conversion. First, “after he left Vigborg” (in Denmark, a Christian country) “Gísli no longer sacrificed, but he still held feasts and showed the same magnanimity as before” (512). A specific point after which Gísli no longer makes sacrifices certainly implies a change of religious heart, and Christianity, or at least a curiosity thereabouts, seems the only viable option. That he still gives generous feasts, however, shows that he maintains the social expectations of his pagan neighbors. Gísli is also buried under stones by the sea (555), which, as Jochens points out, was considered an alternative to true Christian burial.¹⁴ A Christian might be buried at the shore, below

¹⁴ Burial is one practice which has decidedly pagan and Christian (options). Snorri tells us that at one point pagans were burned, but that in his more recent past they were buried in mounds (Jochens “Late and Peace full” 631). Still, while few pagans were given Christian burials, a fair number of Christians were given pagan burials (640).

the high tide mark to avoid being buried in unconsecrated ground (Jochens “Late and Peaceful” 636). This both meets the technical stipulation that, as a body will not stay in the ground, it is not in unhallowed earth, and seems resonantly reminiscent of a second baptism. Gísli might easily have converted to Christianity during his travels in Denmark, or at least become curious enough about it to doubt his pagan upbringing. Similarly, Gísli's men might have given him a somewhat Christian burial because they thought he was a Christian, or because they were Christian themselves. By burying him under stones, similar to a pagan carin, *and* burying him at the coastline, as a substitute for sacred ground, Gísli's burial suggests either mixed faith – both pagan and Christian – or a hedging of bets – neither pagan nor Christian. In any case, the manner of Gísli's burial is unusual enough to merit note, and impractical enough that it is not likely happenstance.

Jochens also makes the somewhat more forced, though certainly intriguing, argument that Gísli's grandmother, Ísgerðr, was likely Christian (“Late and Peaceful” 637, note 83), and could, therefore, have had some influence on his own religious perspective. Jochens notes that the prefix Ís- was extremely rare in Norse names until much later and argues that persons with Ís- names likely considered their former names unsuitable and re-named themselves in honor of their new home, “Ísland” (637).¹⁵ Therefore, they are “undoubtedly” foreign Celts and, hence, likely Christian (637). Gísli's grandmother might then be Celtic – and Christian – herself, or have Celtic/

¹⁵It is worth noting that there did not seem to be any taboo about Norse-Irish or Norse-Pictish marriage in any part of the social spectrum (Jones *Norse Atlantic* 23).

Christian parents. Though this sort of etymological speculation provides interesting ammunition for Jochens' argument, I do not believe that it is sufficient to base a case on without more evidence.

Whether Gísli is considered Christian, Christian influenced, in the process of conversion, or pagan, he exemplifies Norse values. Gísli seems particularly obsessed with and driven by honor, the value we see as Norsest of the Norse. He is at least as concerned with the honor of his family and friends as with his own, to the extent that he consistently takes on the honor of others, generally without asking their consent and often against their wishes. Gísli is particularly concerned with the honor of his sister, Thordis. Our first glimpse of his obsessive honor watch is seen in Gísli's response to Thordis's suspected love affair with their brother Thorkel's friend Bard. Deeply offended at rumors that Bard had seduced Thordis (501), Gísli accompanies Thorkel and Bard to Bard's house. Along the way, "with no warning whatsoever" (501), Gísli attacks and kills Bard. He then teases Thorkel, tells him that he is overreacting, as Gísli had only done the honorable thing, and jokes, "We'll swap swords [. . .] then you'll have the one with the better bite" (501). Unsurprisingly, Thorkel is not amused but is deeply offended at his brother's actions. While Gísli's father applauds Gísli's defense of the family's honor, neither of his siblings agree, suggesting that Gísli's world view is more in line with traditional Icelandic pagan values than the social norm as early as Gísli's youth.

This violent defense of Thordis' honor resulted in Gísli taking on another's honor, not even a family member. After Bard's death, Thorkel goes to stay with one of Bard's

kinsmen, Skeggi the Dueler, whom he encourages to avenge Bard and take Thordis as his wife (502). When Thordis' father denies Skeggi's proposal to Thordis, Skeggi assumes it is because of her new friend Kolbjorn and challenges him to a duel (502); Gísli is appointed his second. Gísli's killing of Bard has driven a wedge between the two brothers, who set up Skeggi and Kolbjorn to fight in their places. Gísli, however, does not leave the matter there. When the day of the duel arrives, Kolbjorn decides that the matter is not important enough to fight over (502), so Gísli usurps his honor and goes in Kolbjorn's place (502), admonishing him that "though it shame you forever[. . .] I will go in instead." Skeggi sees Gísli's assumption of Kolbjorn's honor as indicative of sexual dominance, and he tries to embarrass Gísli and Kolbjorn by carving *nið* statues of the pair¹⁶ (502). Gísli leaves the duel with his own, his sister's, and Kolbjorn's honor in tow, while Skeggi buys his way out after Gísli severs his leg (503). Gísli again demonstrates an extremely traditional view of honor, staunchly defending the honor of his family and friends as it is his own honor they risk.

While neither Thorkel or Kolbjorn, nor, as far as we know, Thordis asked for or even accepted Gísli's imposition of honor, Gísli holds Thordis's honor against her to an even greater degree when she chooses to side with her husband Bork, Thorgrim's brother, against her brother Gísli after she realizes that Gísli murdered Thorgrim, her previous husband. Gísli complains that Thordis owed him better treatment, as he "made it clear

¹⁶Nið is a form of sexual insult, by either word or deed. It is one of the few verbal assaults for which a Norseman had the right to kill, or to receive full compensation as for a death. The Gulathing Code specifies this as saying that a man has given birth to a child, has been "demonstratively fucked," or is a female animal (Clover 8).

several times that her honor meant no less to me than my own” (526). Gísli claims that he sacrificed his personal safety to protect her honor on several occasions, though he names none, and the only possible demonstration in *Gísla Saga* is his duel with Skeggi, and that her confessing Gísli’s murder to Bork has sealed his death. Gísli drags her motives through the mud, declaring:

My sister, too taken
 With her fine cloths,
 Lacks the firm-rooted spirit
 Of Gudrun, Gjuki’s daughter,
 That sea-fire’s goddess,
 Adorned with pearls, who killed
 Her husband with undaunted courage
 To avenge her brave brothers.¹⁷

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Gísli overtly criticizes his sister’s personal honor, admonishing her choice of married family over blood family, the closest and most revered bond in Norse culture. Gísli’s reaction to Thordis’ choice, particularly his specific reference of attack, can be related to the larger conflict between Icelanders as to whether they should hold to their own, remain loyal to their national “kin,” or accept the exogamous relationship offered by the Norwegians. By complaining that Thordis forsook her family specifically for a higher

¹⁷ For the story of Guðrun, see either “The Lay of Atli” or “The Greenlandic Lay of Atli.” Guðrun was considered exemplary of Norse womanhood – strong, loyal, and willing to kill her husband, Atli, and the children she had born him (in Norse culture children were considered part of the father’s family, not the mother’s) to avenge her brothers.

standard of living, Gísli's description of Thordis's situation is analogous to the Icelanders' choice to convert to Christianity, forsaking the old gods, not out of personal conviction but in the hopes of forming stronger trade bonds with the Norwegians.

Gísli seems to spend much of the saga fighting a losing battle with his siblings over the importance of familial honor. After he is made an outlaw, Gísli repeatedly asks Thorkel to provide him with assistance (526, 527, 533, 535), to which Thorkel replies each time that he will provide Gísli with any material assistance he might need (a boat, horses, food, gold), but he will not assist Gísli in any way that might lead to Thorkel himself being prosecuted or held accountable. I see two primary ways to interpret Gísli's repeated solicitation of his brother. On one hand, he might be selfish, attempting to bully or pester his brother into providing him with the level of assistance he requires. On the other hand, if he truly believes that Thorkel is failing to fulfill his fraternal duty, Gísli's repetitive demands could be seen as courteously providing Thorkel with additional opportunities to fulfill his familial obligations. In either case, Gísli seems to have a more strict and traditional view of personal and familial honor than those around him, a very pagan infatuation.

Gísli also demonstrates a typically Norse view of the finality of fate, as he continually waits for fate to take its course or shrugs off events as uncontrollable aspects of destiny. He most clearly articulates this when his wife Aud confesses to him her argument with Asgerd about who was willing to cut out whose shirts and the intimate implications thereof (509). Gísli cannot think of a way to mend the damage caused

between the two couples, but agrees not to be angry with Aud, as “Fate must find someone to speak through. Whatever is meant to happen will happen” (511). Gísli sees his own story as the strand fate has spun for him, a chain of events he can effect, but not fundamentally change. It may well be Gísli's unwillingness to challenge fate, interacting with Thorkel as though nothing had happened, that sealed Gísli's fate in the end.

The only way Gísli sees to attempt to ward off fate is through the use of magic. The most obvious example of this is the ritual of blood brotherhood. When Gest predicts that Gísli, Thorkel, Thorgrim, and Vestein's friendship will fall apart within three years Gísli suggests that they “make certain” to “avert” his prediction by “pledging our sworn brotherhood” (506). In actuality, however, they do much more than pledge; they prop up an arch of turf with a spear, walk under the arch, and then mix their blood with the earth under the arch (506). It is only then that they pledge their oaths to avenge each other as brothers, sealing the ritual with a call for the gods to witness it. This is sympathetic magic; the turf arch allow them to walk simultaneously on earth and under it, invoking both Miðgarð and the underworld. The spear symbolizes a willingness to kill for one another, and the mingling of blood ties the men together. The mixture of blood and earth solidifies into a kind of clay rather than evaporating to a stain as blood alone would have done, adding a permanence to the bond. In an honor based society such as the Norse, to claim each other as brothers the men could merely swear an oath, but by including sympathetic magical practices and invoking the gods they show a belief that magic, rather than personal choice, can avert fate, sparing them from Gest's prediction.

Gísli Saga is full of transition and outright upheaval, to which Gísli responds with ambiguity. He seems to be hedging his bets, never publicly declaring his religion and playing both sides both individually and socially. It may well be that we as readers have trouble discerning Gísli's religious leanings because Gísli is not so sure himself. Gísli's religious ambiguity is certainly not unusual in Iceland – many baptized practicing Christians continued to pray to Odin, Thor, or Frey (Jochens “Late and peaceful” 639). Icelandic Christians clung to their pagan roots, looking to their pagan traditions as points of difference between Icelandic identity and those of other Scandinavian countries. This need to solidify that which defines Iceland and differentiates her from her neighbors continued to grow stronger as Norway increased her Icelandic influence. Gísli's subversive ambiguity allows the saga author to portray the conversion as something more chaotic than simple transition, as something both spiritually and socially unsettling.

Chapter 4: Sweet Dreams and Nightmares

There are two women I dream of. One is good to me. The other always tells me something that makes matters worse than ever, and she only prophesies ill for me.

Gísla Saga 531

While the Christianity or paganism of Gísli's actions and decisions is certainly worth considering in regards to the beliefs of the saga author, we share with Gísli a direct view into the saga's future (the author's present). Dreams often function as narrative devices in the sagas, both demonstrating the future to characters in the saga and providing the audience with insight into how the “future” author views the events of the saga past. Gísli, like most pagan Norse, believes fervently in the power of dreams. After Vestein’s funeral, Gísli sits down with Thorkel and confesses the dreams which have disturbed his sleep on previous nights. He dreamt first of a viper and then of a wolf, both coming to kill Vesting from a particular farm he will not disclose (517). Not only were Gísli’s dreams confirmed by Vestein’s murder, but Gísli is willing to trust the literal accuracy of his dreams, having no more solid evidence that Thorgrim was Vestein’s killer. While Gísli believes in the predictive power of his dreams, he believes even more strongly in the ability of language to shape reality. He only confesses his dreams to Thorkel after Vestein’s death because “I did not want them to come true” (517). Dreams may have the power to predict, but words have the power to fix fate.

Zoe Borovsky asserts that women’s voices were “increasingly interiorized or distanced” in Christianized Norse culture “until they can only be heard in the realm of

visions, dreams, and myth” (26). Comparing Bork’s distrust of Thordis¹⁸ with the prominent place given Gísli’s dream-women seems to support this. While being confined to “visions, dreams, and myth” is no help to living, flesh and blood women, narratively speaking dreams are of prime importance in Norse life. Dreams in the sagas most often function as predictions of the life of the dreamer, warnings which only the proper confidante can interpret (Lönnroth 455-56). *Gísli Saga* gives women a great deal of narrative status, with nearly all of Gísli’s prophetic dreams explicitly attributed to the good and bad dream-women, and Aud acting as Gísli’s prime confidante. Post conversion sagas retain women’s influence from pagan society, both illustrating women’s previous roles and illuminating the worth of women in those roles. As dream speakers and as decoding confidants, women predict the outcome of saga heroes’ choices, guiding them through their own narratives.

Dreams also structure the narrative of family sagas in super-narrative ways, allowing us to “glimpse an existential or metaphysical pattern behind the events” (Morris 456), and providing readers with a sense of later perspective or narrative commentary on the action. While medieval Icelanders would balk at the psychoanalytic notion that dreams provide a window into a character’s unconscious (456), the commentary provided by dreams allows us to glimpse a sort of communal unconscious direction, a sense of where Icelanders think Iceland is heading. As such, Gísli’s dream-women are a major

¹⁸ When Thordis tells Bork that Gísli murdered Thorgrim, Bork wants to immediately turn back and kill Gísli, but he “can’t be sure [. . .] how much truth there is in what Thordis says. It’s just as likely that there’s none. Women’s council is often cold” (526).

source of narrative moral commentary, providing a binary view of Gísli's fate, allowing us to examine oppositional perspectives. Lönnroth identifies the dream-women as *ættarfylgjur*, a type of protective spirit which originated in Norse mythology but continued in Christian times (458); "They are at once pagan valkyries and Christian guardian angels, family fetches, and sexual temptresses, symbols of both life and death" (461). Scholars often look to Gísli's dream-women to represent the tension between pagan and Christian points of view. *Gísli's* dream-women, then, are much more than agents of precognition or conveners of moral value; the dream-women place Gísli in the context of a "universal conflict" (Lönnroth 462), torn between pagan and Christian, old and new, Icelandic and Norwegian.

Many modern readers assign Christianity to the good dream-woman and paganism to the bad – by the time *Gísli Saga* was written Iceland had been Christian for three hundred years; Christianity must be good. This is what the good dream woman suggests herself, instructing Gísli to forsake the old faith, as well as charms or magic (531). She also advises him of more Christian tenets: do not be the first to kill or start an argument; show kindness to the deaf, lame, poor, helpless (531) and handless (532).¹⁹ Interestingly, when the good dream-woman instructs Gísli to care for the needy she refers to him as "shield of Baldr" (532). Though not unusual that a pagan kenning would be used in a Christian context (Lindow 28), it is, in and of itself, a strange kenning: Baldr's

¹⁹ Thirteenth and fourteenth century Icelanders were required by law to take care of the poor, crippled, or otherwise helpless. Everyone in the community donated to a fund called the *hreppr*, which functioned some what like insurance in case of a failed crop or other problem.

shield²⁰ does not protect him. The dream-woman may be suggesting that by caring for the needy Gísli might also shelter Baldr, representative of goodness and kindness. The dream-woman might also be referring to Christ's declaration, "tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40, New International Version). If so, Baldr, who is helpless to avoid his fate, is surely needy and requiring aid. Taking this idea further, by using Baldr to represent human need she may also be equating Baldr with Christ.

Following the binary model, if the good dream-woman is Christian, the bad dream-woman needs must be pagan. While the good dream-woman shows Gísli the number of his remaining years, the bad dream-woman shows him his death in a much more visceral way, appearing "besmeared / hideously in human blood / and washes me in gory flood" (534). Towards the end of his outlawry, the bad dream-woman frequently appears to Gísli,²¹ placing a cap full of blood on his head, covering him with gore (549, 550). He describes her as a "woman of the serpent's lair," in what almost seems a demented parody of Loki's wife, pouring a cap of blood over him rather than catching the poison falling on him. Lönnroth describes her as a "militant valkyrie" (459) tormenting Gísli with visions of his own slaughter. The blood, described by Gísli with the kenning

²⁰ Not necessarily a physical shield. More likely the magic "shield" provided by Frigg's oath-extracting. See Snorri 48.

²¹ After Gísli goes to Geirhofsford to be with Aud he is visited by the bad dream-woman on 534, 549 twice, 550, and 551. Also, in autumn "Gísli's dreams did not ease; indeed, they grew more frequent" (551).

“Odin’s fire” (549), can be seen as a sort of ritual sacrifice, a battlefield offering to a blood-lusty god.²²

However, things may not be as clear cut as they first appear. Though the good dream-woman may tell Gísli to abandon the pagan faith, the afterlife she shows him is very pagan indeed. Gísli’s first glimpse of the supernatural is the setting in which he meets the good dream-woman: the hall in which the good dream woman numbers for him his remaining years – filled with dead friends and relatives, whom we can safely assume to be pagans, drinking and warming themselves by the fire – is much more like Valhalla than the Christian Heaven. Then, as Gísli’s troubles worsen, the good dream-woman returns to him, riding a gray horse, and asks him to come to her home (545). She leads him to a great hall with raised cushioned benches and beautiful decorations. This time the setting is explicitly named as the afterlife, as the good dream-woman tells Gísli “this is where you will come when you die” (545), and an Icelandic audience would associate riding a grey horse with the journey into death (Lönnroth 460). Gísli will “enjoy wealth and great happiness” and apparently his host as well, as “they would stay there and take their pleasure” (*Gísli* 545). Gísli is promised:

you will rule over all this wealth
and have dominion over me,
and we will have riches

²² For instance Óðin – who helped create the cosmos with the grisly remains of Ymir the giant, and to whom men were sacrificed by hanging or with spears – or Thor – whose primary function in mythology is to bash giants to bloody pulps with his hammer.

beyond gold's measure.

546

Lönnroth puts it best, noting “[t]he house of the good dream-woman has thus been transformed from a stately drinking hall full of Gísli’s friends and relatives to an intimate love nest that is also his grave” (460). If one also takes into account the kenning relationships between gold and snakes or dragons, does this bear any resemblance to Heaven? This suggests a trap, the good dream-woman inviting Gísli to die passively, hence forsaking Valhalla and going to Hel.²³ It is worth noting that it is the *dreams* which are marked as “good” or “bad,” not the women themselves. Gísli's dreams of a golden, cushioned afterlife may be pleasant, but that doesn't mean that the good dream-woman has his best interests at heart.

If the good dream-woman is not Christian but pagan, much of what the bad dream-woman does and says comes to a different light. “Now I will destroy everything that the good dream-woman has said to you,” says the bad dream-woman, “and I will make certain that nothing comes of what she has promised” (549). In the poetic section the bad dream-woman warns that Gísli’s relationship with the good dream-woman “will slowly turn to poison,” and “he who rules all” sends Gísli alone to explore this supernatural realm (549). The bloodbath she later gives Gísli can be seen as a particularly aggressive and visceral image of baptism, cleansing Gísli with Christ’s blood, whether he likes it or not. The bad dream-woman may be purifying Gísli to

²³ In Norse mythology the figure of Hel is said to be a beautiful woman on one half and a decaying corpse on the other. Though most depictions show Hel divided laterally, right and left, some show her with the face and torso of a beautiful woman but rotten below the waist. Considering the emphasis placed on Hel’s table and bed, this seems to imply a sort of licentious trickery.

prepare him for a better world than the soft cushions of the good dream-woman's hall (Lönnroth 461). Towards the end of his life, the narrator tells us that Gísli no longer dreamt of both women, but "became very frightened of the dark and dared not be alone any longer. Whenever he closed his eyes he saw the same woman" (550). Based on Gísli's fear, it may seem safe to assume that he continually sees the bad-dream woman; when we are told of Gísli's dreams they are bloody images of his own death (550, 551), which seems in line with the bad dream-woman's other interactions. However, not long before his death Gísli dreams of a weeping woman who binds his wounds (552). We are never told that Gísli dreams of the other woman, so the weeping healer must be the same as the frightening death bringer, suggesting that the one who frightens Gísli is also the one who wants to help him.

Dreams are of great significance in traditional pagan Norse culture, yet they are also often used by saga writers to foreshadow the Christian future. The dream-women are used to provide moral commentary on Gísli's choices and fate, but the morality of that commentary is more complex than it might at first appear. It is easy to assume that because Iceland chose the Christian path Christian always equals good and that the present or easy path is always the right choice, but by leaving such important specifics as the religious representation of Gísli's guardian angels ambiguous the saga author invites us, along with the contemporary audience, to consider all the possibilities.

Chapter Five: Religion and Characterization

“Characters speak up. They say what they want and what their intentions are.”

Smiley xi

The narratives portrayal of Christian or pagan characters can be used as a yard stick with which to measure the saga author's view of the conversion. While neither Gísli nor his dream-women are explicitly identified as Christian or pagan, their ambiguous spirituality would be nothing strange to the saga's original audience. “Mixed faith” was

quite common, both in the sagas and in real life. For instance, Jochens describes a man named Helgi who was a baptized practicing Christian but continued to pray to Thor on sea voyages and during any other hardships (“Late and Peaceful” 639), as though he wasn’t sure Christ was really powerful enough to deal with life’s more serious problems. Though Helgi named his settlement “Kristness,” he trusted Thor to show him where to settle (639). Helgi's actions suggest a pagan perspective, but he considered himself a Christian. This was not considered hypocritical or even strange. His neighbors take his word for it, and so must we. Similarly, in matters of personal religion we must take *Gísli Saga* at face value: does either the character or the narrator state the character’s religion?

Gísli’s wife Aud could be seen as a “pre-Christian” character. Since the narrator/author knows that Aud will convert before the end of the saga, and Christianity is the norm at the time of the saga’s writing, her character must have been written with her future conversion in mind. To determine how *Gísli Saga* represents Aud as a Christian character we must consider her narrative obstacles and triumphs, the sympathy with which her character is portrayed, and how her behavior in the saga compares to the behavior expected of a Christian woman.

Aud’s first major obstacle is the murder of her brother, Vestein. While this event is certainly traumatic for her, it does not affect her character in any real way. Aud is neither responsible for her brother’s death, nor could she have done anything to stop it. Since Gísli removes the spear from Vestein’s chest, he relieves Aud of any obligation to avenge her brother’s death. While Vestein’s death is a major narrative event for the saga

as a whole, his murder plays a very small part in his sister's story. In contrast, Gísli's death initiates huge shifts in Aud's narrative. As a widow Aud travels first to Norway and then to Denmark, where she converts. Her conversion leads her on a pilgrimage to Rome, from which she never returns (557). While Aud's conversion has little if any effect on the story as a whole, it is an pivotal part of her personal story, effectively ending it. Aud has made her exit from *Gísli Saga*, and I doubt that Rome is the stage for her happily-ever-after. More likely, Aud's pilgrimage precipitates her death.

While Gísli's outlawry is one of Aud's greatest challenges, it allows her to express her greatest triumph. Aud and Gísli love each other very much – maintaining their marriage, even though marriage, like all social bonds, was legally dissolved by outlawry (Jones 34) – and it is difficult for them to be apart while Gísli is in hiding. Eventually, Gísli hides near Aud's farm so that they can visit each other (534). This both puts Aud at risk – as she directly helps Gísli, she could be legally, socially, and physically held accountable – and allows her true character to shine through. Throughout Gísli's ordeal, Aud remains true, loyal and fiercely protective.

The most striking example of Aud's loyalty occurs when Eyjolf offers her three hundred pieces of silver in an attempt to bribe her into revealing Gísli's whereabouts. Aud first asks him to count the silver out for her, which he does, spilling it into her lap (547). After it is counted, Aud asks Eyjolf to promise that she may do with the silver whatever she wishes; Eyjolf, of course, agrees (548). Aud then puts the silver into a large purse, gives it a good swing, and smashes it into Eyjolf's nose, spraying him with blood.

take that for your gullibility [. . .] and all the harm that ensues from it.

There was never any hope that I would render my husband into your hands, you evil man. Take this for your cowardice and your shame, and remember, you wretch, for as long as you live, that a woman has struck you. And you will not get what you desire either. 548

Eyjolf is furious and demands that his men kill Aud, but Havard stands up for her, telling Eyjolf that the day's actions were already disgraceful without the addition of killing an unarmed woman (548). This scene, one of the most exciting in the saga, shows Aud as a good Norse woman, remaining loyal to her husband, and using the methods available to her to disgrace his enemies. Aud's trickery is perfectly acceptable in pagan Norse society – in essence, all she has done is hold Eyjolf to his word.

Aud again proves her loyalty to Gísli, exhibiting her exemplariness as a Norse woman, on his last night as an outlaw (552). She not only stays with him to the bitter end, but literally picks up a club to defend him from his enemies (555). “I knew long ago that I had married well,” says Gísli, “but never realized till now that the match was as good as this” (555). Even though Aud fails to kill Eyjolf, as Gísli could have done, he still acknowledges both the quality of her execution and the exemplariness of her intention. Aud's biggest personal challenge, the outlawry and death of her husband, becomes a stage on which to set her character, a way for the author to illumine her as an example of Norse womanhood. While Thordis is compared to Guðrun and comes up wanting, Aud lacks nothing in terms of personal, familial, or marital honor.

Aud is more than just honorable and strong; she is also smart, as is shown in the ease with which she manipulates Eyjolf. Nor does she idealize her husband – she is willing to circumvent him when necessary. After Vestein’s sons avenge their father, killing Gísli’s brother Thorkel at the *ðing*, they go to Aud’s farm to petition Gísli’s help (544). Rather than directing them to Gísli, Aud feeds them, gives them tokens, and sends them across the ridge to “Bjartmar’s sons,” Vestein’s uncles. Only after they are on their way does Aud broach the subject with Gísli (544). He, predictably, responds with anger towards his brother’s killers. By sending the boys on down the road she solves a complex honor conundrum: are the brothers her friends, having avenged her brother, or her foes, having murdered her brother-in-law? She correctly predicts Gísli’s response, avoiding the honorable faux-pas of having to kill her husband for killing her nephews. More subtle, however, is her decision to continue to bring the matter to Gísli’s attention. She gives him the choice “to honor me more than I deserve” (544), helping the boys because they are her kin rather than killing them because they murdered his own kin. Gísli’s assistance of his brother’s killers would normally constitute an extreme breach of the honor of his own family, but since Vestein was also his sworn brother, Gísli could, in a sense, adopt them. By offering Gísli this choice, rather than making for him the choice she expects, Aud both maintains her honor to her family, avoiding a conflict of vengeance, and provides Gísli with a way to get the assistance he wants while still maintaining his honor. Less astute and more reactionary than his wife, Gísli neglects this option.

Overall, Aud is a highly sympathetic character who espouses and demonstrates the values of her audience while making choices we can understand and even cheer on. She is dynamic, assertive, and lively, a well rounded person rather than a flat personification or a brief glimpse or single facet of her character. Aud's religion, either before or after her conversion, however, seems to play little part in what makes her character stand out from the page. While none of her pre-conversion behavior is striking un-Christian – she doesn't "turn the other cheek," but we don't really expect her to do so – it isn't particularly pro-Christian either. The only choice she makes that could be seen as more in line with Christian values than with Norse ones is when she asks Gísli to be more concerned with her honor than with that of his brother. From a Norse viewpoint Gísli's blood relations should come before his marital relations, but from a Christian perspective his wife's (and hence her family's) honor is literally his own, as "two flesh become one".²⁴ Particularly as Aud does not really expect Gísli to honor Vestein's sons, this seems shaky at best. Similarly, Aud does not convert during the meat of the story; we are told of her conversion when the narrator is tying up loose ends, reinforcing just how little the narrator cares about her conversion. Even more striking, Aud's conversion brings about her death – she converts, leaves on a pilgrimage, and never returns. If the author were so inclined, Aud's character could have been excellent ground from which to glorify Christianity, compare Christian and pagan behavior, and show the rewards reaped

²⁴ "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the **two** will **become one** flesh" (Matthew 19:5, NIV).

in a Christian life. Instead the most direct influence of Christianity on Aud's characterization is the manner of her death, alone, far from home, and silent, out of the scope of the saga.

While Aud is the only character explicitly named as Christian, a wider variety of characters are explicitly pagan. While neither Thorgrim Nef nor his sister Audbjorg are allied with a particular god, they both use magic, a practice which was acknowledged and accepted in Norse paganism but completely shunned by Christianity.²⁵ Thorgrim Nef, the magician who helps forge the fragments of the sword Grasida into the spear which kills Vestein, is introduced to us as “the worst kind of sorcerer imaginable” (512). Though the spear itself is not explicitly described as cursed, if Thorgrim Nef made it and Vestein was killed with it then it seems fair to assume that no good can come from it. This spear holds a central place in the action of the narrative, while also providing a foil for the spear used in the ceremony of brotherhood.

Ironically, Thorgrim Nef's greatest obstacle is his sister Audbjorg. During Gísli's games Audbjorg's son Thorstein gets into an argument with Berg, who wounds him (525). That night Audbjorg curses Berg, walking widdershins around the outside of her house “sniffing in all directions” (525). This starts a terrible snowstorm, followed by a flood of water. Berg's homestead is swept aside in an avalanche, killing twelve men (525). Audbjorg and Thorgrim Nef are seized and stoned to death, buried in the mud

²⁵ . . . assuming that one discounts the magical implications of miracles. Since the magical actions of Thorgrim Nef and his sister could by no stretch of the imagination be miracles, I feel safe to discount this argument.

with sacks over their heads (525). Although Thorgrim Nef doesn't appear to have had any direct participation in Audbjorg's murder of Berg and his men, he remains responsible in the eyes of his peers. Perhaps this is because Thorgrim Nef is "the worst kind of sorcerer," and his neighbors (or his narrator) will use any excuse to get him out of the picture. Perhaps as the man of the family Thorgrim was expected to keep his sister in line. In the end it is not clear whether Audbjorg is responsible for Thorgrim's death or he is responsible for her corruption.

While Audbjorg's character is too fleetingly present to triumph in any cause, Thorgrim Nef's magic is successful without getting him killed. After Thorgrim the Goði's funeral, Bork asks Thorgrim Nef to curse the unknown killer, preventing others from providing assistance (523). All we are told of the rite itself is that Thorgrim was given a gelding ox (it is unclear whether this to use in the rite or as payment) and that his "obscene and black art" is practiced on a scaffold "in devilish perversity" (523).

Assuming that Thorgrim Nef is a Norse pagan rather than a devil worshiper as the narrator suggests, a rite practiced on a scaffold would likely have been dedicated to Odin (McKinnell 91). While the narrator describes him in less than glowing terms, Thorgrim Nef is really doing nothing wrong from a Norse point of view. It's hard to imagine a benign purpose for forging the spearhead with Thorgrim the Goði, but cursing a killer is nothing out of the normal moral scope. Gísli would not have become an outlaw if he had claimed Thorgrim's killing and paid compensation. It is Gísli who is acting outside the social law, not Thorgrim Nef.

Neither Thorgrim Nef nor his sister Audbjorg are particularly sympathetic characters. All we know is that they possess powerful magic which they use to cause trouble and that they are stoned to death with bags over their heads, Audbjorg by Bork and Thorgrim Nef by Gísli. They are summarily executed in a dehumanizing fashion without proof, trial, or the backing of the *ðing*, yet no one seems the least concerned. Both the Gísli/ Vestein faction and the Thorkel/ Thorgrim faction agree that the siblings are evil sorcerers to be dispatched without further discussion. Bork's seems the stronger case, as he executes the perpetrator of the spell for killing his men, but Gísli seizes an uninvolved party for killing his enemy's men. Thorgrim Nef had cursed Gísli, but as far as we know Gísli is unaware of this, and there is certainly no indication that Thorgrim was killed because of his curse. Magic, then – or at least mischievous magic – is cause for dehumanizing execution, at least according to Gísli, Bork, and their peers. The narrator makes no comment, so we do not know for certain what might be the view of the author or his peers.

Also, while Thorgrim Nef is the “worst kind of sorcerer,” the narrative is silent on any relationship between Thorgrim Nef or Audbjorg and any god. Is he the worst kind of sorcerer because being any sorcerer at all is bad enough or because he uses his sorceress powers for disruptive ends? The narrator condemns the magic use, but does so in terms of its bloody nature²⁶ or inhuman expression.²⁷ This does not tell us anything about how

²⁶ Thorgrim's sacrifice of the ox on the scaffold

²⁷ Audbjorg's sniffing

the narrator sees magic in general. The sorceress siblings' actions are credited solely to their persons rather than, as might be expected in a Christian text, to the promptings of their heathen gods. The narrator almost seems to have gone out of his way to avoid using the magicians to comment on paganism.

Thorgrim, *Gísli Saga*'s only other definite pagan, seems a polar opposite to Thorgrim Nef and Audbjorg. A goði, Thorgrim both politically and financially supports Gísli and Thorkel (505). A devout pagan, Thorgrim hosts the traditional feasts and sacrifices to Frey. After his murder Thorgrim is buried "in the old way" (523), on a sunken boat, with a separate burial mound being left on land. Amazingly, "the snow never settled on the south-west of Thorgrim's burial mound, nor showed any sign of frost" (523); most felt this was an indication of his devotion to Frey, that "the god had not wanted the ground between them to freeze" (523). Not only does this indicate that the people at large still believed in the old gods and believed that they held real power, but interestingly Thorgrim's burial mound shows that the gods live to the south and west of Iceland, opposing Hel in the north and the giants in the east. This illustrates that the Icelanders viewed the story of Ragnarök in a fundamentally literal way, further reinforcing that if the gods are left behind by their people they must die.

Thorgrim finds triumph in typically Norse ways, through honor and vengeance. He may not, however, be the smartest fellow, as it seems he is easily tricked. Early in the story he buys wood from two Norwegian brothers, Thorrir and Thorarin, and goes home to his son to rejoice in his good deal. His son realizes right away that Thorgrim has had

the bark pulled over his eyes, and goes to confront the brothers about the deal; they kill him outright (507). Thorgrim then chases the Norwegians down, waking them up to avoid killing them in their sleep (507). This escapade brings Thorgrim great renown (507), both because he successfully, dramatically, and emphatically avenged his son and because the fight was of no contest even though Thorgrim relinquished his greatest advantage, waking the brothers before killing them. Thorgrim makes up for falling for simple trickery by chasing down and physically dominating his more intelligent adversaries, avenging his son and retaliating against his those who humiliated him.

Thorgrim is busy creating his own obstacles from the start. His unwillingness to swear brotherhood to Vestein causes the ritual to fall apart in the first place. As far as we know Thorgrim holds no grudge against Vestein; he says that “I will have enough trouble to deal with if I so bind myself to Thorkel and Gísli, my brothers-in-law” (507), and we have no reason not to take him at his word. Thorgrim makes out fairly well, as he is owed brotherhood by everyone but Gísli, and owes it to everyone but Vestein. These two ritual loopholes allow for the bulk of the action in *Gísli Saga*. Since Thorgrim does not swear brotherhood to Vestein, he is free to perpetrate his murder without violating his oath; this would be common knowledge, at least amongst the four of them, and supports Gísli’s assumption that Thorgrim must be the killer. Similarly, as Gísli is the only member of the party not to swear brotherhood to Thorgrim, he is the only one honorably available to avenge Vestein.

There is no suggestion, however, that Thorgrim's unfortunate actions are in any way related to his religion. It is worthwhile to remember that from a traditional Norse perspective the only true wrong Thorgrim commits is not laying claim to Vestein's killing. A killing is not a murder unless the perpetrator fails to claim it, state his reasons, and pay compensation as determined by his peers. If Thorgrim believed that Vestein had violated Thorkel's marriage by having an affair with his wife, Asgerd, then Thorgrim, as Thorkel's sworn brother, would have the right to avenge this breach of honor by killing Vestein. As with Gísli's murder of Thorgrim, the question that remains is why, if Thorgrim believed killing Vestein was a rightful act, did he not claim it, saving himself from Gísli's retaliation? I suspect the answer lies with the burden of proof. Asgerd did not admit to adultery – she says only “I cannot see anything wrong with my liking Vestein” (509) – and as far as we are aware there was no other indication of an extra-marital relationship. Thorgrim is acting on his suspicions, rather than on any evidence which he could bring before the *ðing*.

Thorgrim is portrayed in a rather unsympathetic light. He causes the ritual of blood brotherhood to fail, allies himself with the sorcerer Thorgrim Nef, and murders Vestein on suspicion rather than proof. Still, he does little that Gísli himself has not done. Thorgrim uses sorcerers while Gísli abstains from sacrifice, but their motives – protecting the honor of their sworn brothers – are remarkably similar, and both come to bad ends. Like Thorgrim, Gísli's primary social sin is to kill without claiming responsibility, and both seem to do so because they cannot find solid proof of what they are certain has

occurred. Gísli's and Thorgrim's actions are too parallel to be read in opposition to one another; both men are either in the right or the wrong. If Gísli is a hero, then Thorgrim's murder of Vestein must be accepted; if Thorgrim is a villain, then Gísli must be an anti-hero.

Since Gísli is presented as an admired hero and Thorgrim a shunned villain, the difference must lie elsewhere. If we are to accept that Gísli is a Christian, an evaluative difference emerges. Both men are good Norsemen – each protects his honor and that of his family; each holds feasts for his neighbors, demonstrating his largess; each fights well, and neither is a coward. Thorgrim, however, remains a good and faithful pagan while Gísli is tempted by the new faith, if not fully converting to Christianity, at least wandering from the pagan path. The problem arises when we try to evaluate Gísli's character from a Christian perspective – he falls quite short. While it is not fair to assume that those same qualities which make Gísli a good Norseman make him a bad Christian – the moral systems do overlap a fair bit²⁸ – violence and vengeance don't score many Christ-like points. In the end, we are provided with miraculous evidence that Thorgrim receives his eternal reward, looked after by Frey in the afterlife, but while Gísli's ferocious and heroic death would obviously have gained him entrance to Valhalla, his dreams tell him that he will not go to the blissful afterlife he has been shown. Gísli goes

²⁸As Theodore M. Andersson notes in "The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas." He provides the example of moderation which, though moderation in the sagas is often considered a sign of Christian influence, "is older than Christianity and has hardly been a notable feature of Christian teaching" (592).

to his death afraid of what awaits him, and we are given no reason to believe that his fears are groundless.

Gísli, then, illuminates the incongruity between the Viking perspective and the Christian one. While the narrator dotes on him, safely extolling his Norse virtues, if we view Gísli as a “pre-Christian” it seems that he loses all and gains nothing. Gísli's position is one no one would envy, attempting to leave behind the Norse paradigm yet failing to transition fully into the Christian one. While Thorgrim, Thorgrim Nef, and Audbjorg are condemned by the narrator and the other characters, Gísli and Aud, the only Christians, are condemned by their own narratives. Gísli and Aud make the more politically savvy choice, damning themselves to miserable lives and unfortunate deaths, while Thorgrim receives his eternal reward protected shielded from Hel by his fealty to Frey. Christianity has not materialized its earthly reward, making its unearthly reward suspect. The Icelanders lost their political identity without the substantial trade benefits promised by conversion.

"I know much and can see more, warriors,
the Ragnarök of the mighty gods." Voluspá, R43

Ragnarök is the story around which all Norse paganism revolves, and the *Voluspá* is the earliest, most narratively complete telling of the story of Ragnarök. The *Voluspá* is similar to *Gísla Saga* in its straddling of pagan and Christian Norse culture. As in *Gísla*, the action takes place in pagan times but was written down long after the conversion. As such, and as both extant versions of the *Voluspá* would have been available to the author of *Gísla Saga*, I have chosen to focus my investigation of Ragnarök on its depiction in the *Voluspá*.

Frederick T. Wood argues in “The Age of the ‘Vǫluspá’” that while some of the narrative components of the *Voluspá* existed at least as early as the saga of Baldr in the sixth century (94), the poetic *Voluspá* with which we are familiar likely coalesced no later than the tenth century, as Western Scandinavian poems which it seems to have influenced can be found in the tenth and eleventh centuries.²⁹ A composition or at least solidification in the tenth century also supports the view that the *Voluspá* reflects a concern with or desire for the spread of Christianity through the Scandinavian countries, as well as a concern with the end of the world, which would fit well with the widespread first millennial scare.

²⁹ Wood notes strophe 8 of Þjóðólfr of Hvin's 'Haustlǫng' in the tenth century and Finnur Jónsson's analysis of a strophe by Arnorr Þórðarson in the eleventh century (94)

John Lindow cautions that while the Eddic poems may be our best record of Norse pagan mythology we cannot ignore the likely influences of two and a half centuries of Christianity in the Norse lands (30).³⁰ The *Voluspá* itself certainly shows signs of outside influence, even in the *Codex Regus* or *Konungsbók*,³¹ the earliest manuscript source for the *Poetic Edda* (Dunn xvi).³² Many have commented on the similarities between the *Voluspá* and the Roman Sibylline Books (Wood 97). Wood argues that while the *Voluspá* is by no means a direct imitation of Sibylline poetry, both texts deal similarly with many of the same themes, such as prophesy, the destruction of the world, universal fire, and the last judgment (97). Wood also points out that the two poems use virtually identical methods of legitimization; that is, both authors prove the accuracy of thier seeresses by having her prophesy prior events, hence providing the audience with a way of judging her accuracy (97). Whether of not the author of the *Voluspá* had read the Sibylline Books, he certainly seems to have been aware of them.

The *Voluspá* also bears some similarity to Biblical passages of prophesy, particularly *Revelation*, possibly indicating at least a familiarity with Christianity. Wood points out similarities between the Niðhǫggr found in stanza 58 of *Hauksbók* (R 63) and

³⁰This can, however, be taken to unreasonable extremes. J. M. Hart lamented, as early as 1880, that “What used to be regarded as the quintessence of Germanic cosmogony, as the most valuable record of primitive heathen belief, becomes now the merest dregs of spurious Christianity” (440).

³¹*Codex Regus No. 2356* in the Royal Library of Denmark.

³²Most scholars agree that *Konungsbók* was written down in the last half of the thirteenth century (xiv Hollander); Charles Dunn specifies no earlier than 1270 (xvi).

the dragon in *Revelation* 12 (102), for example, and the questioning refrain of the *Voluspá* with the desperate questions of *Isaiah* 40 (103).³³ More remarkably, Múspellr the fire giant may have had his birth in *Revelation* as well; W. Krogmann traces “*múspellr*” etymologically back to Old Saxon with the meaning “killer with the mouth” (qtd Wood 104). This title was also used for Christ, as *Revelation* describes him slaying his foes with a sword growing from his mouth (Wood 104).³⁴ The *Voluspá* is also the only version of the Ragnarök story which includes a world consuming fire as an integral part of the action (105). Even more telling, however, are the similarities in language between the *Voluspá* and medieval Scandinavian Christian documents, which indicate much more than a passing familiarity with Christianity on the part of the writer; a number of words which appear in the *Voluspá* were used almost exclusively in Icelandic “clerical prose” (103). These similarities in theme, imagery, and language seem to indicate that the *Voluspá* reached a form like the versions with which we are familiar some time in the tenth century, at the hands of an author fairly intimately acquainted with Christianity and its prophetic texts, and likely concerned with the proposed coming apocalypse in the year one thousand (107).

Loki, the villain of the story, appears most changed by the increasing influence of Christianity. By the time *Hauksbók*³⁵ was compiled in the beginning of the fourteenth

³³ *Isaiah* 40:21 “Have ye not known? Have ye not heard? Hath it not been told to you from the beginning? Have ye not understood from the foundation of the earth?”

³⁴ *Revelation* 1:16 and 19:5

³⁵ So named because it is believed to have been largely written by an Icelandic judge named Haukr Erlendsson (xiv Hollander). Also known as *Manuscript Codex No. 544* of the Arnamagnæan Collection.

century (xiv Hollander), significant shifts in both the tone and the action of the narrative had occurred. Comparing Loki's role in the *Konungsbók* and the *Hauksbók*, let alone his actions in the *Voluspá* with his deportment in other texts, reveals both a decrease in his emotional resonance (the less we understand his actions the less likely we are to sympathize with his character) and a marked increase in the severity of the trouble he causes, most notably his role in the war of Ragnarök. As a morally gray character like Loki could find no place in the Christian mythic scheme, Wood asserts that Loki was "degraded to equality with the devil" (104), reduced from a multi-faceted trickster figure who causes trouble amongst the gods – as, for instance, when he steals Sif's golden hair – but is ultimately willing to make great personal sacrifices to help them in their eternal conflict with the giants – when Loki shape shifts into a mare and gives birth to Slepner, saving the gods by "distracting" the giant builder's stallion. In fact, the largest discrepancy between the manuscripts is the absence of an articulated reason for the gods to punish Loki in *Hauksbók* – no reason is needed to cast out a devil.

However *Hauksbók* also contains some verses which are absent from *Konungsbók*, most notably stanza 57:

To this place comes the power	Of the god
Strong from the south ³⁶	Who rides over.. ³⁷

To which some later manuscript copies add :

³⁶Can also be translated "from above"

³⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of the *Voluspá* are my own.

He puts judgment aright and settles suits,
Establishes holy fates, those that should be.³⁸

As Lindow points out, “It is difficult to avoid the thought that ‘the powerful one’ refers to the Christian God,” and the author of the additional lines certainly saw it as such (31), but it is also difficult to determine whether this stanza is a Christian interpolation upon the manuscript or the intention of the author of *Hauksbók*.

6.1 Analyzing the Two Voluspás

While a great deal of scholarship discusses the *Voluspá* in varying degrees of intensity, very little has been written about the differences between the primary manuscript versions. In fact, no published English translations exist which are manuscript specific, nor do most translations note which manuscript a given stanza is from, let alone note where individual stanzas differ from manuscript to manuscript. I have translated the two separate texts, which appear in the Appendix. I also have included here a comparison of the two texts, as these manuscript shifts are both narratively and societally significant.

Since, as has already been noted, the two manuscripts containing the *Voluspá* differ significantly from one another, it seems most productive to discuss the events of Ragnarök, as outlined in the *Voluspá*, chronologically, noting when an episode or detail is present in one manuscript but not the other, or occurs in a different order. In both manuscripts, the lead up to Ragnarök seems to begin with Snorri's “Master Builder

³⁸Tr. Lindow 31

Tale”³⁹ (35-36). Od, a giant, is to be given Freyja, one of the Æsir, in marriage (R 25, H 21) but Thor objects, “swollen with rage” (R 26, H22), and goes to attack the giants, an activity for which he is well known. We are told that “his supernatural strength ordains his fate” (R26, H22), asserting that Thor’s reliance on physical strength and brutality to solve the gods’ problems with the giants seals his fate later in Ragnarök.

The familiar story of Baldr’s accidental murder by Hod, set up by Loki, is only discussed in *Konungsbók*, where the seeress describes Baldr, “the bloody god [. . .] in the cloak of fate,” killed by mistletoe, “slender and very fair” (R31). It is fated that Hod shoot Baldr with the mistletoe (R32), the only plant from which Frigg failed to extract a promise not to hurt him.⁴⁰ In the words of the seeress, “Reborn⁴¹ early, / I saw Oðin’s son take the road one night” (R32). Oðin displays his grief by not washing or combing his hair until Baldr’s pyre has been burnt (R33). This chapter of the story may have been omitted for fear that more staunchly Christian later Icelandic audiences might conflate Baldr with Christ,⁴² or it may simply have been seen as an

³⁹In short, a builder came to the Æsir and offered to build them a wall around their settlement. A deal is reached with the builder, a disguised giant, that if he completes the wall over the winter (a feat the gods expect to be impossible) he will be given the sun, the moon, and the goddess Freyja; if on the first day of summer there is any part of the wall unfinished he will receive nothing. In the end, the gods resort to trickery, sending Loki out to prevent the giant from finishing his task. Loki does so by shape shifting into a mare and luring away the giant’s stallion, who had been doing the brunt of the labor. When Loki returns, he has given birth to Slepner, Oðin’s eight legged horse (Snorri 35-36).

⁴⁰ When Baldr’s death is originally prophesied, Frigg attempts to avoid this fate by extracting promises from fire, water, iron, metal, stone, dearth, trees, diseases, animals, birds, poison, and snakes (Snorri 48) not to hurt him, but she neglects the mistletoe, thinking it is too small and young to kill him. All the gods then take turns shooting and throwing things at Baldr and watching them bounce off, harmless. Loki takes a sprig of mistletoe and hands it to Hod, the blind god, who shoots it at Baldr, killing him.

⁴¹ Reborn into the afterlife; an early death.

⁴²While similarities between pagan gods and the Christian God or saints were often stressed by missionaries trying to incite cultural conversion, this interchangeable view of religious figures was then disregarded as a temptation to return to paganism.

unnecessary way to further vilify Loki – a devil does not need to perform heinous deeds for the audience to recognize him as evil.

At this juncture, after Thor's violent rage, *Hauksbók* tells us of the “old woman” in Járnsviðr,⁴³ whom we know to be Loki as s/he then fathers Fenris, the wolf whom “it is fated [. . .] will eat⁴⁴ the earth” (H24). The Fenris Wolf eats the flesh of frightened men, splashing the thrones of the gods red with their blood (H25); “the sun shines black across all” (H25). This is the beginning of the first war in the world (H26), and the gods then meet to determine whether they should pay tribute to the giants (presumably for what Thor did in his swollen rage), or whether they are owed compensation by the giants (H28). Depending on how one reads these stanzas this may be a foreshadowing of Ragnarök, solidifying the relationship between Loki's murder of Baldr and the end of the world, or this blood and darkness may simply parallel Ragnarök because one is the first war and the other the last.

Here the manuscripts again converge, telling of the fate of Loki, described as “Captive in the ketil-grove” in *Hauksbók* 30, or simply “bound” in *Konungsbók* 34. He is accompanied in both cases by his wife Sigyn. *Hauksbók* relates this to “Vála

weaving a spell,” who is likely Loki in disguise, whereas *Konungsbók* speaks of slain Baldr, “caught in a trap.” *Hauksbók* again specifies Loki as the malicious, reasonless instigator of this trouble, also binding Loki and his evil to magic, a typically

⁴³ Literally “Troll World,” often also translated “Iron Wood”

⁴⁴ Literally “tongue”

Christian association. In *Hauksbók* we are greeted with the first of five repetitions, in whole or in part, of the refrain:

Garm bays loudly before Gniphelli
 He will break his fetters and run free.
 I know much and can see more, warriors,
 the Ragnarök of the mighty gods. (H31)⁴⁵

Both manuscripts single out Loki as the start of the trouble, but *Hauksbók* appears to blame him for his tendency to play both sides, providing the giants with Fenris Olf, a powerful weapon in the war against the Æsir, not for Baldr's death. Hence, in *Konungsbók* the event which triggers Ragnarök is Loki's treachery and involvement in Baldr's death, while in *Hauksbók* it is Loki's two-facedness, residing with the gods while providing the giants with the Fenris Wolf and his monstrous kin. By turning H 31 into a refrain, the author of *Hauksbók* continuously reminds us of Loki's instigation of the events which follow.

Only *Konungsbók* describes an invasion from the east, presumably of giants, possibly to free Loki, which flows "like poison through the valley. / A black river of blades called Slípr" (R35). *Konungsbók* also tells us of a hall of gold, facing North (R36). It is a beer-hall for Sindri's kin. Hel⁴⁶ stands on Corpse-strand, "so far from the sun" (R37). Inside, "poison falls, slaying the people / underground,

⁴⁵ A complete refrain is repeated in H36, and partial or fragmentary refrains occur at 41, 46, and 50.

⁴⁶ Hel is both the name of the Norse ruler of the underworld and the name of the kingdom of the dead itself.

its walls writhe with black snakes” (R37). Likely another part of Hel, the seeress sees evil men – murderers, oath breakers, outlaws or “wolves,” and seducers of other men’s wives – wading through a river (R38). Nithhogg eats the dead men and the wolf tears them to pieces (R38). Here *Konungsbók* tells of Loki’s fathering of Fenris and of the Wolf’s fate (R39); there are no appreciable differences between this stanza and H24. R40 repeats H25; the wolf reddens the god’s seats and the sun turns black in summer.

Here the narratives run parallel once more, as Egþer, the giants’ watchman, plays his harp and the Golden bird watches Fjalarr (R41, H32). Gullinkambi crows to gather the Æsir to the battle of Ragnarök and is mirrored underground by a bird, “red

with soot in Hel” (R42, H33), who calls the giants. *Konungsbók* interjects Garm’s baying and breaking free (R43), but the stanza does not function as a refrain as in *Hauksbók*. This seems to suggest that the author of *Konungsbók* sees Garm as yet another giant riding to the great battle, while *Hauksbók*’s use of the stanza as a refrain amplifies Garm’s personal role in Ragnarök while reinforcing Loki’s role in freeing him to kill the gods. *Hauksbók* doubles back and repeats R37 on Corpse-strand (H34) and R38 with the punishment of evil men, but in *Hauksbók* the seeress wades the roiling stream with them, rather than observing them as an outsider (H35). This suggests that *Hauksbók* describes the seeress as evil, though the poet does not specify whether the seeress herself is a murderer, adulteress, or oath breaker, or whether soothsaying itself is inherently evil. The two manuscripts again converge with the first real statement about how Ragnarök will affect society here in Miðgarð:

brothers will fight children, and it will come to pass
 that sisters' young kin bonds⁴⁷ destroy.
 the world will be harsh. [. . . .]
 will no man another spare. (R44)

Hauksbók's wording differs slightly in that brothers will fight each other and must protect children (H37), but in both manuscripts the poet proclaims that judgment from the gods will be harsh, and the world will fall in ruin into the sea.

Heimdall blows his horn and Oðin seeks wisdom in Mims's decapitated head (R45, H38). Ymir, the giant whose body makes up the earth, shakes Yggdrasil, causing it to groan, as "the giant" breaks free (R46, H39). While grammatically it may seem the Ymir, the last giant mentioned, must be the giant who runs free, as *Hauksbók* adds that those traveling Hel's road are frightened "Until Surt and his kin cross that sea" (H39) it seems likely that Surt is the giant in question. At this juncture, the gods in *Hauksbók* call an ðing and the dwarfs prepare for battle (H40). In both manuscripts the giant Hrym comes from the east with his shield held high before him, followed by Jormangand thrashing in the sea, and "the hawk" screaming and rending corpses (R48, H42). They come with Naglfari, literally "Nail Traveler," the ship made from dead men's nails. Múspell also sails from the east, with Loki in the lead (called "the foolish son" in *Konungsbók*) with all his monstrous progeny (R49, H43).

⁴⁷ Some translations suggest that these kinship bonds are violated (as by incest) rather than broken.

The gods in *Konungsbók* hold their ðing now (R50), as the fire giant Surt comes from the south, killing Odin (R52, H45), setting the forests alight and letting the giantesses rove free (R51, H44); as men are sent to Hel, the heavens are cloven in two. Suggesting a greater concern for traditional Norse familial honor, only in *Konungsbók* depicts Sigfödur, the great son of Oðin, directly avenging his father, standing upon Surt with his sword through his heart (R53). Sigfödur is fated to kill the Miðgarð Serpent, though Thor took nine steps back (R54). In *Hauksbók* Odin fights the wolf (Fenris) and the serpent (Jormangand), one god against the monstrous two (H47), shifting closer to the Christian paradigm in which the side of god and good must triumph against all odds.

At this point, the world truly ends – the sun and stars go out, the earth sinks into the sea, and smoke rises up “like gray hair, to heaven itself” (R55, H49).

However, the earth is replaced by another celestial “companion,” green again, with waterfalls and flying birds; the seeress asks “know you who has the power to fell

the tree?” (R57, H51). The gods meet, and speak thunderously about Jormangand and Oðin’s strong and ancient runes (R58, H52). *Konungsbók* promises that *in the future* unsown fields will bear fruit and Baldr will return, living peacefully with Hoð (R60). *Hauksbók*, however, instructs the gods/listeners to *remember* these same great events (H54). A hall thatched with gold, fairer than the sun, houses good people through the ages (R62, H56), and *Hauksbók* then interjects that controversial verse:

Here comes the authority the powerful god

strong from above⁴⁸

who rides over all.

H57

The parallel narrative continues on to tell us of the dark dragon of Niðafjöll, flying across the sky with “disgraced corpses” clutched in its feathers (R63), or more horrific still on feathers made of corpses (H58).

The manuscripts end slightly differently. *Konungsbók* declares “Now must she sink” (R63), which could refer to either the dragon or the seeress, while *Hauksbók* decisively states “Now she remembers sinking” (H58), which almost certainly refers to the seeress either sinking to the ground, exhausted from her trance, or sinking into the ground, if one assumes that the seeress is a specter called up by Óðin to prophesy to him. If, in *Konungsbók*, the dragon sinks then the world is free to begin again, building up as it had been and possibly repeating the cycle with Baldr, the kinder, gentler god, at the head of a new pantheon – perhaps even morphing into Christ, with his unearned death and glorious resurrection. This perspective is in line with that of a converting people, a tactic used by missionaries everywhere, but would have become less acceptable over time as the population shifted from *kristnitaka* to *siðaskipti*. Yet, if it is the seeress who sinks and the dragon remains free to roam, the dragon can, without universal disruption, be considered the Christian devil, punishing unrighteous souls even before the Norse knew Christ, and continuing to do so after the death of the Norse gods.

While the surviving texts of the *Völuspá* have more in common than not, those differences are both narratively and socioculturally significant. *Konungsbók* focuses

⁴⁸ Can also be read “from the south”

more on the justness of the god's punishment of Loki, while *Hauksbók* assumes that the gods are right because they are the gods and Loki is punished because he is the devil – the significance of Baldr's murder is lost once it is no longer necessary to prove Loki a villain and once it is inappropriate to imply conflation of Baldr and Christ. *Hauksbók* stresses Loki's part as a giant and the Father of Monsters rather than as the murderer of Baldr. While our copies of both these text were written down after the conversion, *Hauksbók* was scribed by someone much more concerned with keeping Loki evil and the gods dead.

Chapter Seven: The Dragon is in the Details: Comparing Signs of Ragnarök with the Events of *Gísla Saga*

There comes the dark dragon flying

From down beneath H58, R63

Gísla Saga is temporally located at an extremely interesting juncture. As the action of the saga takes place in the lead up to the Icelandic conversion but the saga was written between the conversion to Christianity and the submission to the Norwegians, *Gísla Saga* is remarkably well placed to provide us with a window into the Icelandic perception of the relationship of these events. By carefully examining and comparing the events and imagery in *Voluspá* and *Gísla Saga* one can see a relationship in the way the Icelanders talk about Ragnarök and its precursors and the submission, prefigured by the conversion.

7.1 Signs of Ragnarök

I have laid out the narrative specifics in each manuscript of the *Voluspá*, but in order to discuss the similarities between the apocalyptic imagery of Ragnarök and the narrative happenings of *Gísla Saga* I must specify that which the *Voluspá* tells us signals

the coming of Ragnarök. An examination of how these same apocalyptic images and instances appear in *Gísla Saga* will illuminate how the Icelanders navigated the archetypal relationship between the mythic destruction of Ragnarök and the cultural disintegration of the conversion. These signs can be broken into groups, determined by their sphere of influence, including natural phenomena, social phenomena, and associative markers.

Signs of Ragnarök in the natural world include birds calling – specifically gold birds, (R42, H33), red birds (R42, H33), and hawks (R48, H42) – and wolves howling (R43, H31, 36, 41, 46, 50). The animals are restless, but not acting unnaturally or even unusually. Earthquakes (R46, H39), burning forests (R51, H44), and roiling seas (R48, H42) also prefigure the final battle, again conveying a sense of unrest, though still acting within natural norms. Unlike the disturbed animals, however, this earthly unease will do more than make the Norse nervous; earthquakes, forest fires, and storms at sea directly interfere with the Nordic way of life, obstructing and threatening their livelihood. When the seeress turns her eyes to the heavens the story surpasses the mundane and turns to the mythic. The sun radiates darkness (R40, H25) and the heavens split in two (R51, H44). In the end the sun and stars go out, the earth sinks into the sea, and the wreckage smokes to heaven (R55, H49). Most of the natural indicators of Ragnarök are things the Icelanders would have witnessed, if not every day, then certainly often enough for every generation to have its candidate for Ragnarök. It is only when the conflict reaches the heavens themselves that the signs begin to fall outside the natural bounds.

Social indicators of the arrival of Ragnarök include inappropriate exomous marriage (R 25, H 21), ambiguous compensation (R23, H28), violent anger (R 26, H22), dissolving kin bonds – definitely violence (R32, R44, H37) and disloyalty (R49, H43), possibly incest (R44, H37), adultery, oath breaking, outlawry, murder (R38, H35), and the absence of mercy (R44, H37). Many indicators suggest a distrust of others, particularly exogamous marriage, murder, and mercilessness. Others, those concerned with systems of kinship bonds and compensation, show an erosion of the entire Norse social structure. All of these result in harsh judgment from the gods (R44, H37), redundantly smiting their people for social transgression which leads to disintegration. While fate is a defining force, personal choices and characteristics can help seal one's fate (R26, H22). Those social controls which facilitate the Norse world turning as it should are failing; the gods smite the Norse and it is their own doing.

These images and instances indicate that Ragnarök is coming; the other type of signs are those which indicate an association with either the heroes or the villains, the gods or the giants. The giants and their allies are associated with soot (R42, H33) and fire (R52, H45), symptoms of their destructive power. They cross seas – specifically to attack (H39), come from the east (R35, R48, H42, R49, H43) and the south (R52, H45), and are far from the sun (R37, H34). They travel a river of blades (R35). They bring the roiling water (R38, H35, R48, H42) and wolves (R40, H25, R43, H31, 36, 41, 46, 50, R46, H39, R38, H35, R39, H24, H47) which prefigure Ragnarök, but also are accompanied by snakes, serpents, and dragons (R37, H34, R38, H35, R48, H42, R54, H47). They poison

(R35, R37, H34) and slaughter (R40, H25), desecrating corpses (R38, H35, R48, H42) and eating men (R40, H25, R38, H35), a hyperbole of the social erosion present on earth. The giants break free (R43, H31, 36, 41, 46, 50, R46, H39) of the constraints set upon them, sending all into chaos. Loki, leader of the giants and instigator of the war, is associated with disguise (H30), ambiguous or dual gender (R39, H24), bondage or captivity (R34, H30), his silent suffering wife Sigyn (R34, H30), shape shifting (R39, H24), and monstrous progeny (R39, H24, R49, H43). Loki is also a liminal figure, neither wholly god nor wholly giant, and whenever he chooses one over the other he is violating a kinship bond. Loki then functions as a symbol of the conflicts of the converting Norse, as the struggle between blood kin and married kin, kin bonds and spiritual bonds, commonalities with Icelanders and commonalities with other Norse in general.

The gods are associated with rage (R 26, H22), strength (R 26, H22), and proper vengeance (R53), distinguished from the giants mostly by narrative implication – when the gods show strength they are mighty; when the giants show strength they are terrible. The gods are also directly linked to powerful magic through the casting of mighty runes (R58, H52). While the giants may do things which appear magical to us – Surt setting the forests alight with his flaming sword, for example – these “magical” effects are presented as a part of the characters' supernatural abilities, whereas the gods cast magic through ritual in much the same way as their human followers. Baldr, the god whose importance most changes with the rising influence of Christianity, is associated with

mistletoe (R32), blood (R31), inescapable fate (R31), early death (R32), resurrection (R32), and miraculous healing and crop growing (R60, H54).

Because the conflict of Ragnarök is binary, markers of Ragnarök can easily be divided into the side of the gods and the side of the giants, with other uncategorisable events functioning as indications of the time at hand. These categories correspond with spheres of influence, as previously discussed – natural phenomena indicate that Ragnarök is coming or has come, while associative markers indicate allegiance to a particular group. Social phenomena are the outcome of Ragnarök, the ways in which the supernatural battle affect the natural human world.

7.2 Ragnarök in Gísli Saga

Only now that we have thoroughly examined the portents and alliances of Ragnarök can we integrate these associations into our understanding of *Gísli Saga*. Motifs which appear in the *Voluspá* signifying the end times appear throughout *Gísli Saga*. In the *Voluspá*, two birds, a gold and a red, cry, signaling for the armies to come together in Ragnarök (R42, H33). Gísli is called to his final battle by the cries of birds as well; he is awakened by a dream of red, screaming, blood-covered loons only to hear the approach of Eyjolf and his men (552). The loons call Gísli to battle as they have already summoned his enemies. In this battle, however, it seems that the scales are tipped by more than fate, as Gísli's enemies have a head start.

Along their way to Ragnarök, Surt and his giants burn the forests (R51, H44), as Skeggi's sons and Kolbjorn burn down Gísli's father's house in retaliation for Gísli

having cut off Skeggi's leg (503). Gísli's family retaliates by burning Kolbjorn's house, killing him and all inside, although Kolbjorn had been blackmailed into the burning by Skeggi's sons. Though this conflict is not central to the overall narrative, it is important in the story of Gísli's family, providing his father with the nickname which is then used as the siblings' patronymic.⁴⁹ This conflict, ending as it does with Sur and the Sursons sailing off to kill Skeggi's sons, also precipitates the family settling in Iceland (504). Gísli and his family have already been chased by fire before they even leave Norway, perhaps looking to Iceland as their shining land rising from the sea (R57, H51).

Prefiguring Ragnarök, the sun emits darkness rather than light (R40, H25), and in the end both the sun and the stars are snuffed out (R51, H44). Similarly, Thorkel's complaint that he has been "kept in the dark" by Audbjorg about her relationship with Vestein (510) precipitates Thorgrim's murder of Vestein. Audbjorg's tactful lack of disclosure brings the lives of the other characters down around their ears, yet it is Gísli himself who chooses the darkest path. Extinguishing the lamps in Thorgrim's house, he gropes his sister and murders Thorgrim in this thick self-imposed darkness (521).

As the sun dims the sea crashes, roiling as the World Serpent thrashes (R48, H42). Though the literal seas do storm in *Gísli Saga*, as when Gísli and Vestein wreck their ship attempting a business venture (508),⁵⁰ other waters roil as well. Audbjorg sends a literal flood down the hillside to bury Berg's house in an avalanche (525), and Gísli

⁴⁹ Thorbjorn and his sons Gísli and Thorkel escape from the house by dipping goat hides in whey to protect themselves from the fire. Thorbjorn is thereafter called Thorbjorn Sur, or whey (504).

⁵⁰ after the four men separate following the botched bond of brotherhood

describes Aud's tears for her murdered brother as a gushing stream (518). Audbjorg is Aud's foil – everything which Aud is not. Where Aud is honorable and defends her husband, Audbjorg is vengeful and curses her son's enemies; where Aud is the epitome of a good Norse wife Audbjorg lives with her equally evil brother, possibly suggesting incest; where Aud becomes a Christian Audbjorg practices black magic. By disrupting the fabric of Norse society the slithering world serpent brings violent emotions to a boil, erupting out at both ends of the social spectrum.⁵¹

Most pervasive in *Gísli's Saga* is the motif of splitting into two. *Gísli* does not show as in the *Voluspá* (R51, H44), a splitting of the heavens, but both the physical splitting of objects and the more esoteric, metaphorical splitting of families and friendships are present in the saga. These splits always either precipitate or result from conflict and often end in death. Three splits occur in the saga as predictors of death. First, the night Vestein is murdered a terrible storm strikes, ripping half of the roof off the house (515). The rain coming through the roof prompts Gísli and his men to jump up from their beds and rush out to cover the hay, leaving Vestein and Aud alone in the house. Then, during the winter games after Thorgrim's murder, Bork becomes so angry that he breaks Thorstein's bat in two (524-25). An argument which results from these same games results in Audbjorg's magical murder of Berg and his household. Also, as Gísli sits down to fix Thorstein's bat he mutters his fateful verse about Thorgrim's burial mound which results in his outlawry. Lastly, one of Gísli's premonitory dreams of his

⁵¹It is also worth noting that women are the target of the traditionally phallic serpent.

own death shows his head being cleft in two through his helm (552); this prediction is not literal, as Gísli dies of various wounds, not a split skull, but may indicate the splitting of Gísli's soul from his body (555). Splits which result from conflict rather than precipitate it include the interlocking coin Gísli creates as a result of his fear for Vestein's safety (508) and the dividing of the farmstead, the two brothers' inheritance, which Thorkel requests after overhearing Asgerd's and Aud's shirt cutting conversation. This physical splitting of assets both illuminates the emotional split between the brothers and synecdochically mirrors the pervasive degradation of family loyalty seen throughout the saga.

In the end, the results of Ragnarök are the subversion and destruction of traditional Norse society, and many indications of this destruction occur in *Gísli Saga*. Motifs of murder and outlawry (R38, H35) are so prominent in the narrative workings of *Gísli Saga* as to hardly merit discussion. Adultery (R38, H35) is also central, as a question of marital fidelity marks the first lost love between Thorkel and Vestein (509) and eventually leads to Vestein's murder. Equally prevalent is the theme of dissolving kin bonds (R32, R44, H37, R49, H43). Thorstein's betrayal of his mother, Audbjorg, after she magically murders Berg and his men with an avalanche (525) is the only kin betrayal in the saga which involves the parental bond; all other instances focus on Gísli's sibling bonds. It is Gísli's own sister, Thordis, who realizes that Gísli is Thorgrim's (her then-husband's) killer. When she tells her new husband, Bork, he starts the movement to get Gísli outlawed, sending men to chase around the country to kill him (525). Thordis is

placed in the classic Norse woman's dilemma of married kin versus blood kin. Gísli expects her to make the proper Norse choice, siding with him over all others, even though he murdered her husband while she slept in the bed with him. In the end, however, Thordis does side with Gísli, emasculating Eyjolf and divorcing Bork (556), but she does not support Gísli in any way prior to his death.

The bond between Gísli and his brother Thorkel is the primary focus of the saga. Thorkel chooses to legally split the brother's combined inheritance, leaving Gísli the farm while he takes the portable goods and moves in with Thorgrim (511). This is the beginning of the end, as Gísli persistently petitions Thorkel for aid throughout his outlawry, while Thorkel continues to deny him the level of aid appropriate to a brother. Thorkel offers again and again to warn Gísli of attacks or provide him with material necessities, but he will not publicly stand with his brother. Thorkel feels that Gísli has personally wronged him by killing Thorgrim: "my brother-in-law, my partner, and my close friend" (526). In this statement Thorkel has verbally ranked relationships of marriage, business, and friendship higher than familial bonds, and while he does not work directly against Gísli, as Thordis does, he seems to have even less regard for the socially sacred bond of brotherhood. Gísli, on the other hand, takes his brotherhood so seriously that he threatens to kill Vestein's sons for killing Thorkel, even though they are also working to avenge Vestein (545).

There is some suggestion that the *Voluspá* also refers to incest, a more insidious violation of the kinship bond (R44, H37). *Gísla Saga* certainly can be interpreted as

depicting an incestuous relationship between Gísli and Thordis, the greatest evidence being when Gísli goes to kill Thorgrim and puts his hand on his sister's breast (521). Gísli's obsession with his sister's possible love interests is also somewhat suspicious. He kills Bard at the mere suggestion that he might have seduced Thordis (501), and replaces Kolbjorn in a duel for her honor (502), a duel for which Thordis was theoretically the prize. In the end, however, it matters little whether the bonds of family are broken by disturbance and disloyalty or perverse intimacy. When kin bonds, the primary ties in Norse society, are broken, the judgment of the gods is swift and sharp (R44, H37), and none can escape their fate (R26, H22).

7.3 Gísli's Godly Associations

The gods in the *Voluspá* possess certain characteristics and associations which their enemies do not share. In *Gísli Saga*, Gísli alone shares all of these characteristics. Like the gods (R26, H22), Gísli is far stronger than those around him, and this is recognized by his observers. Most of his neighbors correctly predicted (519) that Gísli would beat Thorgrim in the winter games after Vestein's murder (518), and Gísli is the only man who can throw a rock from the shore to an island (529). Gísli is also the only character in the saga to make use of runes (535, 552). Though there is no way to determine if they are "mighty" as the gods' words (R58, H52) as we are not told what he writes, they certainly have a profound effect on Thorkel causing him to come out and speak to Gísli one last time.

The gods, specifically Thor, are associated with righteous rage:

“He seldom sits when he hears such news” (R26, H22), that Freyja is betrothed to a giant. Gísli directly parallels Thor’s reaction when he kills Bard without warning over the rumor that Bard seduced his sister (501). In fact, the only way the situation that could have been more parallel is if Gísli had killed Bard with a hammer. The only prominent difference is the degree of relationship. Thor is upset that a giant wished to wed one of the gods, a matter of category and propriety, whereas Gísli defends his sister against all comers without regard for the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the match.

Gísli also shares common markers with Baldr. Like Baldr, Gísli is held to his fate (R31), inescapable even by magic. Just as Frigg’s meddling fails to protect Baldr – extracting promises did nothing more than determine the manner of Baldr’s demise – Gísli’s attempt to circumvent his fate by magic – the ritual of blood brotherhood amongst the friends – does nothing to alter the outcome. In the end, “fate will take its course” (507). Gísli views the conflict between himself and his brother, started by Asgerd and Aud’s infamous shirt cutting conversation, in a similar light; “Whatever is meant to happen will happen” (511). Like Baldr, Gísli’s fate can be seen as a microcosmic preview of the fate of his people – Baldr’s fate is as inescapable as that of the gods in Ragnarök, and Gísli’s outlawry and eventual death prefigure both the death of the gods in the wake of the Christian conversion and the death of Iceland as a nation when it is annexed into Norway.

Outside of his fateful death, Baldr's primary association is as "the bloody god" (R31). While Gísli sustains wounds at numerous times which would obviously bleed, the narrator never mentions him bleeding. The only times Gísli speaks of blood [either his own (550, 551) or others (534, 549)] are in connection with the bad dream-woman. When Gísli dreams of his own blood it always signifies his impending death, and when the bad dream-woman brings sacrificial blood she pours it over him, bathing him. No other blood is dreamt of or otherwise used symbolically. When the blood of other characters is mentioned the blood is literal, physical, and the result of specific wounds. When Gísli knocks Thorgrim down during the games after Vestein's death Thorgrim skins his knees and bloodies his nose (519); Eyjolf also has his nose bloodied by Aud (548). In both of these cases the blood is being actively bled – discussion of active bleeding is humiliating in a way which being wounded is not. When Vestein's sons behead Thorkel the blood on the sword is mentioned, not the bleeding man (543), but the implication still seems to be negative. In all three cases the blood is humiliating and retaliatory: Thorgrim had killed Vestein, Eyjolf had tried to bribe Aud, and Thorkel let himself be flattered into handing his sword to a stranger. Gísli's bloody nightmares suggest that what he fears the most is to be humiliated and made powerless. While the narrator might argue that Gísli is too powerful to face humiliation at the hands of mere mortals, this spiritual dominance seems to suggest much darker explanations. Gísli's last terror inducing dream is of two fighting loons, screaming and wallowing in gore (552). This final revelation suggests that both sides are equally damned, humiliated and

powerless. Gísli, I would imagine, would point to fate as the culprit; while he speaks of his fate more often than his fellow characters' their destinies are shaped along with his.

If fate brings humiliation to all, makes all defenseless, what does this say of Baldr, the bloody god himself? Baldr is also bloodied in a somewhat embarrassing manner, unable to defend himself from the delicate mistletoe, but Baldr has done nothing to deserve his fate. With such emphasis placed on public honor, I suspect that the Norse would consider it far worse to accept humiliation that one has not earned than to be punished for one's actions. This rings true with the Norse characterizations of Christ as weak and effeminate (Clover 364). While Norse Christians often point to the similarities between Christ and Baldr, Norse pagans are much more likely to compare the White Christ to the Red Thor (Borovsky 7-9), and Christ comes up wanting. Perhaps Gísli's terror at the bad dream-woman comes less from her visceral ritual than from the fear that baptism, which Christians advocate as a spiritual purification, washing one's soul in Christ's cleansing blood, will in fact bring emasculating helplessness and humiliation. Like Baldr (R32) or Christ, Gísli is gruesomely sent to his grave before his years are up, but he misses out on resurrection (R32) and miraculous healing (R60, H54).

Strangely, Gísli also shares considerable association with Loki, the nexus around which the giants and their allies swirl. Though the manuscripts differ as to the specifics, Loki is the cause of Ragnarök and though allied with the gods as one of their own Loki eventually claims his other heritage, sailing with the giants to Ragnarök. While Gísli and Baldr show comparable associations with fate, death, and blood, Gísli can also be

compared to Loki in his ability to shift his shape to disguise himself (H30, R39, H24). While Gísli does not physically shape shift as Loki does, he gets remarkable results from minor changes, as when he switches cloaks with his slave, Thord the Coward, who is chased through the woods and killed, maintaining the illusion that he is Gísli until his body is examined, allowing ample time for Gísli to escape (527-28). Sometimes Gísli's enemies look right at him and are fooled by sheer mimicry, as when Gísli convinces Eyjolf and his men that he is Ingjald's simple son by tangling himself up in the tackle and acting goofy (538). Gísli can also apply this power of disguise to objects, as when he crafts the coin which appears whole, though it can be broken into two halves (508). It is tempting to try to compare Gísli's wife Aud with Loki's wife Sigyn, but whereas Sigyn quietly sits and suffers (R34, H30), Aud breaks Eyjolf's nose.

Gísli, then, is holding most of the cards. He is the only character with strong similarities to the gods as they are portrayed in *The Voluspá* and shows direct parallels with Baldr as well. That he is also the only character comparable to Loki complicates the matter. That the protagonist of the saga is portrayed like one of the gods – strong, powerful, and one of the “good guys” – is no real surprise, but he shows as many similarities to Loki as he does to Baldr. Gísli is the victim, if you will, the one upon whom sufferings are inflicted by fate, but he has a hand in the creation of those sufferings as well. Gísli first suggests the ritual of blood brotherhood which, rather than supporting the men's friendship, subverts these bonds, alienating Thorgrim from Vestein and Gísli from Thorgrim. Similarly, Gísli's murder of Thorgrim, which was only

required of Gísli because of the bond of blood brotherhood, is the very action which permanently alienates him from his brother Thorkel. Gísli sows the seeds of his own undoing, creating a situation in which his siblings desert him and he is physically alienated through outlawry.

7.4 *Giants and their Allies*

While fires burning are one of the atmospheric signs that Ragnarök is at hand, the giants and their allies are the ones who start and control the fires (R52 H45). In *Gísla Saga* fire plays a role in two parts of the narrative. First, as mentioned above, Thorbjorn gains the nickname Sur when escaping from an episode of murderous arson; (531). Thorbjorn then retaliates in kind. As these burnings are mutual, it seems more reasonable to consider these fires markers of Ragnarök than indicators of allegiance or parallel. The only other fires in *Gísla Saga* are those the good dream-woman shows to Gísli in her visions of the afterlife. While the fires themselves represent Gísli's life (532), his remaining years, the fires also consume his life, illuminating his slow unstoppable decent into death. While the good dream-woman may be more comforting to Gísli, she encourages him to give up, relaxing into peaceful unproductive death. The bad dream-woman demands that Gísli fight to the end, embracing his visceral fate and taking as many with him as he can. The bad dream-woman warns Gísli that the "great love" the good dream-woman offers him "will slowly turn to poison" (549), which is brought by the giants (R35, R37, H34).

The giants and their allies sail to the battle of Ragnarök, traveling the whale-road to attack their enemies (H39). Two instances of sailing towards confrontation occur as part of the main murder and vengeance plot of *Gísli Saga*. First, in an action directly opposed to Gísli himself, Bork and his men sail out to confront Gísli when he is hiding at Ingjald's (537). This trip gains the men little but frustration, as Gísli makes fools of them once again, playing the part of Ingjald's simple son when Bork and his men stop and talk to the slave woman accompanying Gísli. Still, no matter the actual outcome, the men's intentions were serious, planning to kill Gísli for violating his outlawry. Vestein's sons were far more successful when they sailed to the ðing (541) to avenge their father by killing Thorkel. Though it would be possible to view Vestein's sons as on the same side as Gísli, avenging Vestein as Gísli does, Gísli himself denounces this argument, choosing to view them as his brother's murderers rather than his blood brother's avengers (544). Though they style themselves Gísli's friends, hoping that he will help hide them with him, Gísli considers them enemies and would have killed them if not for Aud's correct prediction of Gísli's reaction.

In a more concrete form of association, the giants' allies include serpents (R37, H34, R38, H35, R48, H42, R54, H47) and wolves (R40, H25, R43, H31, 36, 41, 46, 50, R46, H39, R38, H35, R39, H24, H47), animals which Gísli associates with specific people in dreams. Gísli's first prophetic dream of Vestein's murder depicts a viper coming out of a certain farm and stinging Vestein to death (517). His second dream of Vestein's death depicts a wolf running out from the same farm and biting Vestein to death

(517). It is unclear whether Gísli dreams of two different animals to represent two different people involved in the murder – either Thorgrim and Thorkel or Thorgrim and Thorgrim Nef – or whether different animals in each dream are simply meant to reinforce the evil of Thorgrim’s plot. Gísli again dreams of a wolf coming to kill when Eyjolf is searching for him. He dreams that Eyjolf comes to kill him with a large group of men; the first to attack howls and has the head of a wolf (550). Serpents and wolves always come to kill, and always target the Gísli – Vestein pair.

The giants and their allies are also associated with particular directions. The giants come from the east (R35, R48, H42, R49, H43), as Bork and Thorkel do when they attend the Thorsness assembly (527). Bork also comes from the east hunting for Gísli. After the stoning of Audbjorg and Thorgrim Nef, Bork heads for Thorsness, feeling “that his journey west had brought him no honor – he had lost a man of Thorgrim’s caliber and matters had not been put right” (525). The giants also come from the south (R52, H45), as Bork does when he sails to Ingjald’s farm looking for Gísli (537). In his final battle Eyjolf and his men follow Gísli to his southern hideout under the ridge (552). Eyjolf and Bork travel from the south and east to attack Gísli, allying themselves with various others along the way. This directional association is very specific, referring only to those passages where direction is explicitly mentioned (rather than mapping out all the steads and determining directional travel between them), and only seems to be invoked when the travel involves characters who are specifically out to kill Gísli.

Though Gísli shows some similarity to Loki, Gísli's relationship with his giants remains firmly antagonistic. Vestein's sons sail to Thorkel's murder (544) as the giants sail to Ragnarök, but Gísli firmly refuses to steer their ship. Though Gísli could have chosen to view the brothers as his allies, working, as he did, to avenge Vestein, he decides to focus on his familial ties to Thorkel, though Thorkel refused to fulfill his own end of the fraternal bargain. Gísli also views Thorgrim as a giant, dreaming of him coming to kill Vestein first as a serpent and then as a wolf (517). He may not have attacked Gísli's person directly, but by murdering Vestein, Gísli's brother by magic, while simultaneously violating Gísli's hospitality by attacking a guest in his home, Thorgrim could have done little more to attack Gísli's honor. Bork, Eyjolf, and their men also serves as Gísli's giants, sailing in to attack (537), coming from the east and south (525, 527, 537, 552). They function as Fenris Wolf and Jormangand, Surt and his minions, leading their own small armies to attack Gísli and bring him down, pulling the fabric of his age behind him.

These men are all quite directly Gísli's enemies. The good dream-woman, however, puts herself forth as Gísli's ally, offering him gentle advice and promising him a pleasant afterlife, yet she alone brings fire to the saga. The years of Gísli's life are burned away by the good dream-woman as surely as the trees of Miðgarð are set alight by Surt's sword. If we accept the postulate that the good dream-woman represents Christianity and the bad dream-woman paganism then it is the Christians who poison and burn, while the bloodbath brought by the pagan bad dream-woman fortifies Gísli to continue his fight, even if fear is his primary motivator. Gísli dies a warrior entitled to Valhalla, joining his

friends and family gathered in the hall rather than falling prey to the good dream-woman's seduction, joining her in Hel's bed. Signaling the relationship between Gísli and the Christian faith, the good dream-woman encourages Gísli to turn away from Norse pagan values, taking sides against the gods. Gísli's fear of the bad dream-woman and her thoroughly pagan mien shows that the good dream-woman succeeds to some extent, linking Gísli to Loki in his ambiguous relationship to the gods.

How, then, do the other giant-kin of *Gísli Saga* relate to the good dream-woman? Religion alone is not the answer, for only Aud is explicitly named as Christian, and she is Gísli's staunchest supporter. Thorgrim is so devout a pagan that the gods honor him in death; how, then, would he side with the giants rather than the gods he reveres? It is important to keep in mind that the Icelandic conversion was less a nationwide leap of faith and more an aristocratic consideration of economics. The *kristnitaka* was the first step towards political sublimation, while the later *siðaskipti* actually indicated a change in religious outlook. Thorgrim's character is similarly economically focused. Thorgrim is a goði (505), and his encouragement to Thorkel to rely on him financially and politically increases the rift between Thorkel and Gísli. Our first real snapshot of Thorgrim's character is when he chases down the Norwegian brothers who gave him a bad deal on timber (507). This emphasizes both Thorgrim's inability to manage his wealth and responsibility, as his poor choice of deals instigates the murder of his son, and his willingness to rely on the word of Norwegians who are in reality shady characters out to con him (507). Thorgrim's ties to Norway are further emphasized when, after avenging

his son against the Norwegian brothers, Thorgrim travels to Norway and speaks with King Harald Grey-cloak, who “gave them a friendly welcome, and they pledged themselves as his followers” (508). It is *because of* this that Thorgrim becomes “wealthy and well established” (508).

The relationship between wealth and Norway is underscored again and again, as most of the trading is done by Norwegians or by Icelanders with Norwegian partners. Besides the fraternal Norwegian lumber traders, both Gísli and Vestein (508) and Thorgrim and Thorkel (508-9) get their financial starts with Norwegian ships and partners, and Vestein leaves Iceland and Gísli to attend to a matter with his partner in England, a Norwegian by birth (508). This differential relationship between Norway and England is duly noted. The time of the saga is first established by noting the ruling Norwegian king, Hakon, and his relationship to the king of England. Hakon was fostered in the English court (500), a relationship which is both intimate and subservient. The relationship between Norway and England mirrors the relationship between Iceland and Norway at the composition of the saga, but things will continue to go down hill for Iceland. Fawning at the feet of another nation is bad enough, but formally relinquishing control to another monarch is far worse, for without individual identity how can one attain or maintain national honor?

Like the giants, Bork comes from the east to summon Gísli to the Thorsness assembly (527), and indeed each time he hunts for Gísli. He also sails from the south to

Ingjald's farm (537) seeking to slay him. While parallel locations to Jotinheim and Hel⁵² are tentative forms of association, Bork seems to go out of his way to associate with Norwegians, marking them as Gísli's enemies. Bork's choice of men seems to indicate a belief that the Norwegians are better for such tasks than Icelanders; one of Bork's Norwegian companion does more damage to Gísli than any other man before his final battle. Thorgrim the Norwegian accompanies Bork when he first goes to fetch Gísli and bring him before the *ðing* (527-28), and kills Thord the Coward, thinking he is Gísli, with a perfect throw of his spear. Then, in an expert display of huntsmanship, he wounds Gísli by throwing his spear towards a rustling bush. The only Icelander with skill greater than that of Thorgrim the Norwegian is Gísli himself, lifting up yet another Thorgrim to foil Gísli. Norway's strength, skill, and luck may be great, but Gísli's is greater, even as he is reduced to hiding in the bushes. Bork's communal position can similarly be compared to Norway's economic position; Bork runs the show, deciding who should be brought to justice, as when he goes to fetch Gísli, and assigning men his bidding, as he does with the Norwegian Thorgrim and with Eyjolf. Eyjolf's position can be compared to that of Iceland's future, taking orders from Bork and doing most of the legwork in exchange for economic gain. The payment is not worth the price, as Gísli points out (555). Aud reinforces the inequality between money and trouble when she bashes Eyjolf's nose in with his own bribe, bloodying and otherwise humiliating him. Gísli himself relates

⁵²Jotinheim, the giants' home, is in the east, while Hel's home is to the south.

Eyjolf and his men to the giants, dreaming of the attack to come lead by a howling wolf (550). By relenting to Norway, Iceland has become her own enemy.

More subtle is the relationship between Vestein's sons, who sail in to the *ðing*, killing Thorkel dramatically with his own blade (541). The boys have only tenuous ties to Norway⁵³, nor are they tied to Christianity. Also, while Gísli does not appreciate their actions, they are not directly attacking or confronting him. The boys expect Gísli to welcome them as allies. By killing Thorkel they are unknowingly working against their own interests, as Thorkel did not kill Vestein himself (though he may have agreed with it) and by killing him they alienated their only real potential ally. Icelandic society went through a similar stage of ambiguous self-defeating aggression as they struggled to find a way to deal with Christian missionaries. Though one of the biggest pagan fears of Christianity was that conflicting Christian values might erode pagan Icelandic society as a whole, the pagan legal reaction hypocritically perpetuated its own greatest fear. The *ðing* decreed that if any were to speak blasphemously of the Norse god their own families were to prosecute the offender or face outlawry for three years (Jochens "Late" 645). By requiring blood relatives to take legal action against one another the *ðing* created that which it most feared, "[undercutting] the bonds that held society itself together" (645). Like Vestein's sons, pagan Icelanders stabbed themselves in the back, alienating those who would have been their allies and forcing families to outlaw themselves.

⁵³ Their grandfather was known as Vestein the Norwegian

**Chapter Eight: From Golden Feathers to Ghastly Corpses: The Subversive
Implications of Godly Gísli and the Commercial Conversion**

*You will rule over all this wealth
and have dominion over me,
and we will have riches
beyond gold's measure.*

Gísla Saga 546

Gísli's place in the story of Ragnarök is clear – only he is on the side of the gods. Like the giants, however, Gísli's enemies are varied – some Christian, some pagan, some allied with Norway, some with wealth, and some making enemies of their only friends. The large span of time between the political *kristnitaka* and the personal *siðaskipti* allowed for the extremely speculative and self aware Icelandic populace to examine the socio political implications of their commercially oriented conversion at a time when they were not, as a whole, particularly personally invested in their new religion. The conversion era sagas provided Icelandic authors a place in which to explore their past and the ways in which it informs both their present and their future.

Like Steinunn in *Njáls Saga*, the narratives of Gísli and Aud subversively attack the ever increasing Norwegian influence on undeniably Norse terms, undermining the adopted Christian norms by lauding the actions of characters, both Christian and pagan,

who follow the course of the Norse gods rather than the motives of Christ or his saints. As the goðar lost power during the pagan rescission the Norwegian bishops were waiting to take it up. By dictating the structure of the newly forming Icelandic church, the Norwegians also strongly influenced the division of secular authority. Though Icelanders owed their origins to Norway, they still strove to distance themselves from their Norwegian neighbors, resisting all the more the closer the two countries became. The Icelanders remained aware of the secular Norwegian backing of their new national church, used the sagas as a safe space in which to praise their pagan past, a time nostalgically seen as free from such foreign influence. By allowing the Norwegians to determine the state religion, Icelanders lost six and a half centuries under Hakon's sons.

Whatever Gísli's true religious leanings, he remains a staunch example of traditional Norse values, as concerned, if not more so, with the honor of his friends and family, and has more in common with the gods in the *Voluspá* than any other character in his saga. His wife, Aud, rivals Gudrun in her illumination and validation of traditional Norse culture, and her death on the road to Jerusalem makes clear for the audience to road down which conversion leads. Gísli's attack of his sister Thordis' choice of husband over blood kin is also a direct attack on the Icelandic coerced conversion, describes Thordis' betrayal as nothing more than greedily grasping at gold. Thordis' final recantation, however, reveals the author's dream Iceland might rise up and take back her culture before it is too late, recalling Gísli and the traditions he represents before they go with him to his glorious death.

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Appendix A

The *Voluspá*, as found in *Konungsbók* and *Hauksbók*

Here are my literal, line by line, translations of the *Voluspá*. Parenthetical abbreviations behind each stanza number indicate the corresponding stanza in the opposing text, where applicable. I have kept the standard abbreviation “R” for “*Codex Regis*,” though I have referred to the manuscript by the Icelandic “*Konungsbók*.” Astrix (*) stand in for lost or illegible lines; where I was unable to translate a line or find a translation which seemed appropriate I have left the original Icelandic.

Konungsbók

R1 (H1)

Listen bid I	All kin
Greater and lesser	Sons, in Heimdallr.
Do you, Father of the Slain, wish	To know the future?
An ancient spell or tale concerning men	In the future.

R2 (H2)

I remember giants	Of long ago and bear witness about them.
There in that place was I	Brought up and kept
I remember nine worlds	Nine branching roots

Of the famous perfect tree Because of the earth underneath it.

R3 (H3)

Humanity was created long ago In that place where Yimir dwelt.

There was no sand Nor cold wave,

No earth nor Eve Nor heavens.

Everything gaped empty, Vegetation was nowhere.

R4 (H4)

First Bur's sons, Lifted the land over,

That from which Midgard The famous was created.

The sun shined from the south Upon the stone hall;

In that place grew The green leek.

R5 (H5)

The sun threw from the south Her companion the moon

Her arm within the grave mound Across the horizon.

The sun is not certain Where the halls are she owns.

The stars, they know not The places they own.

The moon knows not The supernatural strength he possesses.

R6 (H6)

In that place all the gods walked, At the council seat,
 The most holy gods, And they guarded
 Night and waning moon. A name they gave
 Morning; They named The middle of the day and
 The midday meal and the evening. They counted the years.

R7 (h7 b7)

The gods found At Ithval
 Outdoor and indoor temples *hatimbroðo*.
 Forges gave, Wealth was forged,
 Tongs were created, And tools were built.

R8 (H8)

They played at table games in the courtyard Merrily.
 Nothing was done Except with gold.
 Until three came, Giant maidens,
 Very loathsome, Out of the realm of the giants.

R9 (H9)

In that place walked all the gods *

*

*

Must the dwarves' Leader create
 Out of Brimir's blood And out of Bláin's hollow bones

R10 (H10)

There in Motsognir The greatest came to pass,
 All the dwarfs And Durinn and Anar.
 Manlike Many were made,
 Dwarfs out of earth As Durin told it.

R11 (H11-16)

Nýi⁵⁴ & Niði⁵⁵ Norðri⁵⁶ & Suðri⁵⁷
 Austri⁵⁸ & Vestri⁵⁹ Alþiófr⁶⁰ Dvalinn⁶¹
 * *
 Bívorr, Bøðvarr⁶² Bømburr, Nóri
 Án & Ánarr Ái⁶³ Miðvitnir⁶⁴

⁵⁴ "New Moon"

⁵⁵ "Waned Moon"

⁵⁶ "North"

⁵⁷ "South"

⁵⁸ "East"

⁵⁹ "West"

⁶⁰ "Great Thief"

⁶¹ "Delayer"

⁶² "Battle"

⁶³ "Great Grandfather"

⁶⁴ "Mead Wolf"

R12 (H11-16)

Veigr ⁶⁵ & Gandálfr ⁶⁶	Vindálfr ⁶⁷ Þráinn
Þeccr ⁶⁸ & Þorinn	Þrór, Vitr ⁶⁹ & Litr ⁷⁰
Nár ⁷¹ & Nýráðr ⁷²	Now keep I dwarfs,
RegiN ⁷³ & Ráðsviðr ⁷⁴	Rightly do I declare them.

R13 (H 11-16 B 11-16)

Fíli, Kíli,	Fundinn ⁷⁵ Náli.
Hepti ⁷⁶ Víli.	Hánarr, Svíurr.
* *	
* *	
Frár, Hornbori,	Frægr& Lóni,
Aurvangr ⁷⁷ Iari,	Eikinskialdi ⁷⁸

R14 (H11-16)

⁶⁵ “Liquor”

⁶⁶ “Staff elf”

⁶⁷ “Wind elf”

⁶⁸ “Known”

⁶⁹ “Color”

⁷⁰ “Wise”

⁷¹ “Corpse”

⁷² “New council”

⁷³ “power”

⁷⁴ “council sharp”

⁷⁵ “Foundling”

⁷⁶ “haft”

⁷⁷ “Mud field”

⁷⁸ “Oakenshield”

A tale of dwarfs, Of Dvalinn and the host,
 The people and progeny Of Lofarr I will enumerate,
 Who sought The hall of stone,
 Muddy ground with seats Of gravel.

R15 (H11-16)

In that place stayed Draupnir & Dolgbrasir

Har ⁷⁹Haugspori,⁸⁰ Hlevang ⁸¹Gloi,⁸²

* *

Skirvir. Virvir. Skafith, Ai⁸³

Alf ⁸⁴& Yngvi, Eikinskjald⁸⁵

Fjalar & Frosti⁸⁶ Finn & Ginnari⁸⁷

R16 (H11-16)

He will grow; Meanwhile humans flourish.

A long list of descendants Has Lofar.

⁷⁹ “Grey hair”

⁸⁰ “Mound-river”

⁸¹ “Lee-plain”

⁸² “Glow”

⁸³ “Great-grandfather”

⁸⁴ “Elf”

⁸⁵ “Oakenshield”

⁸⁶ “Frosty”

⁸⁷ “Betrayal”

R17 (H17)

Until three came	Out of that host,
Strong and benevolent	Towards the gods and their house,
Found in a land	Little able
To keep Ash and Embla	From their fate.

R18 (H18)

Breath was not owned,	Voice was not held.
Blood, not voices	Nor good looks
gave Odin; breath and	Voice gave Hœnir;
Blood gave Lóðurr,	And good looks.

R19 (h19 b19)

I know an ash tree who stands firm	Called Yggdrasill,
Whose grey hair flows	Shining like silver –
From thence comes the dew –	Which in the valley of the slain
Stands firm, forever above the green	Of Urðr's well.

R20 (H20)

Thence come maidens	Many know.
---------------------	------------

Three out of them know Who stands firm beneath Yggdrasil:
 Urðr ⁸⁸one is named, The second verða ⁸⁹
 Carved upon the wood, Sculd ⁹⁰is the third.
 In that place fates are put down, In that place lives are determined;
 Of children, The destiny of warriors.

R21 (H26)

Remember that war, The earliest in the world,
 When Gulveig Was pierced with spears from all sides
 And in Odin's hall She burned.
 Thrice burned, Thrice witnessed.
 Frequently, repeatedly, Yet she lives.

R22 (H27)

Heiðr ⁹¹was she named; Always she came to houses.
 The sorceress prophesied with ease. She knew magic spirits;
 She knew how to bewitch, Bewitch in a trance.
 She always delights, This young woman, in ill ⁹².

⁸⁸ "Dire fate"

⁸⁹ "Become"

⁹⁰ "Shall"

⁹¹ "Bright"

⁹² OR "This ill woman."

R23 (H28)

In that place walked all the gods. *

* *

Shall the gods Pay tribute or compensation?

Or shall all the gods Lay claim to compensation?

R24 (H29)

Odin hurled And threw over the troops.

He caused a war, The earlies in the world.

The wall is destroyed, The castle of the gods.

This might proclaim the Vanir's death; The seeress is spurned.

R25 (H21)

In that place walked all the gods *

* *

Those who hold the sky Destruction blend.

Of the tribe of giants, Od is given a maiden in marriage.

R26 (H22)

Thor was in that place, Swollen with rage

He seldom sits When he hears such news.

He goes on your Word & sea
 Tales; his supernatural strength ordains his fate, You who have some power
 to make things happen.

R27 (H23)

Knows she Heimdall. Silences she the host of warriors
 Below that bright Sacred tree.
 A waterfall pours down, A mighty stream.
 Out of that tree, Valföðr's Knowledge, in that certain place.

R28

A truth she uncovered. In that place you, the old man, came.
 You are the terror of the gods & have the power to have seen
 The news which I Question and put to the test.
 I know completely, Oðin, Where you hid your eye,
 In the great wondrous well, And drank Mimir's mead
 Every morning Out of the tree.
 Know you one who sees earlier?

R29

Hervath⁹³ Wished for her Rings and necklaces,
 Cattle, too, for her tales & prophetic spirits.
 She saw me and concerning me, Concerning every world.

R30

Saw she valkyries Enchanted come across,
 Riding towards men At the gods' friendly invitation.
 Sculd held one shield, Skogul another,
 Gunnarr, Hildr, Gandálfr, & Geirskögul.
 Now are named They who are ready to
 Make the ride towards The ground: the valkyries.

R31

I saw Balder, The bloody god,
 Oðin's child, Out of the cloak of fate.
 There stood across The field, lord,
 Slender and very fair, The mistletoe.

R32

⁹³ Odin

And because of that Which I showed,
 That slender plant Hod took and shot
 Balder, our brother. Reborn early,
 I saw Oðin's son take The road one night.

R33

Yet he did not wash his hand Nor comb his head,
 I bear witness, before fire claimed Baldr's pyre.
 But Frigg wept over him In Fensulir
 Slain easily in the hall. Know you one who sees earlier?

R34 (H30)

* *
 * *

Haft she saw slay Baldr, Claimed by the land below.
 Willingly harmed as though Caught in a trap.
 In that place resides Sigyn, Silent concerning her husband
 Bound. Know you one and all?

R35

From the east they flow, Like poison through the valley,

A black river of blades Called Slipr.

R36

They stood facing North Towards Niðavöllum,
 The hall of gold. Sindri's kin
 One stood, and another, Claimed Okoiní,
 The giant's beer-hall And saw the one named Brímír.

R37 (H34)

She stood at a hall So far from the sun
 On Corpse-strand With its doors faceting north .
 Poison falls, slaying The people
 Underground; Its walls writhe with black snakes.

R38 (H35)

She saw them wading Through the roiling stream,
 murderers Oath-breakers, & outlaws⁹⁴
 & men who seduced Other men's wives.
 There at the warrior kinsman's grave mound Nithhhogg eats the dead, þar
 súg niþ ha/gr nái f^{ra}m gengna

⁹⁴Literally "wolves"

The wolf rends them. Know you one and all?

R39 (H24)

Truly, in the east was an old woman, In Járarviði

And she raised there Fenris' kin

All this happens because of that Certain one

Who will devourer the sun In the world of the trolls.

R40 (H25)

Frightened men, He eats their fair flesh.

Red are the god's seats With their red blood.

The sunshine Will become dark in summer

And the weather will be evil. Know you one and all?

R41 (H32)

He sits upon the mound & strikes his harp,

The giant's watchman, Happy Egber.

A Golden bird In the singing tree:

She, fair and red, Saw he who is called Fjalarr.

R42 (H33)

Gold to the gods, Gullinkambi

I saw help And crow at Herjaföðrs.
 And another crows Beneath the earth.
 Truly she is red From soot in Hel.

R43 (H36)

Garm howls greatly Before Gnipahelli.
 Firm must his fetters be, But he will burst them.
 Fiölð is wise and knowledgeable; I see far into the future
 Concerning Ragnarök, The fate of the gods.

R44 (H37)

Brothers will fight Children, and it will come to pass
 That sisters' young Kin bonds destroy⁹⁵.
 The world will be harsh; High judgment will be harsh.
 Hero age, fated age⁹⁶, Shield age will be cleaved,
 Wind age, wolf age, Until the world falls to the sea.

* *

No man will another spare.

⁹⁵ Some translators suggest that these kinship bonds are violated (as by incest) rather than broken.

⁹⁶ Literally *skulum*: "shall, must, ought"

R45 (H38)

Like Mims' son, Offspring of the dispenser of fate,
 calls forward Gjallarhorni;
 Loud blows Heimdall's Horn in the sky.
 Oðin speaks With Mim's head

R46 (H39)

Ymir shakes the tree And the giant is free.
 Yggdrasil trembles; The ash tree⁹⁷ groans.

R47 (H41?)

Fragmentary. Untranslated

R48 (H43)

Hrym comes from the east, His shield held before him.
 Jormandgand is shown In giant rage
 Snaking through the waves, And the hawk cries
 Rending fallen corpses; Naglfar⁹⁸ breaks loose.

⁹⁷Also "spear"

⁹⁸"Nail traveler," made from the nails of dead men.

R49 (H43 b51)

Sailing from the east	Will come Múspell
From across the sea,	And Loki steers –
The foolish son	Among all the wolves
Which the brother	Of Býleipts fathered.

R50 (H40)

Who is among the gods?	Who is among the elves?
All the world's giants clash,	The gods hold an ðing.
Stone dwarfs	Before the stone doorway,
Masters of the battle mountain.	Know you one and all?

R51 (H44)

Surt comes from the south	With the Destroyer of Branches;
His sword gleams	Like the sun.
The mountains shake	And the giantess roves.
Men go to Hel's hall	And the heavens are cloven.

R52 (H45)

There for Hlin	More grief is ahead
When Oðin travels	By the Wolf Road.

The slayer of Beli Goes towards Surt;
 In that place will Friggjar's Delight fall.

R53

There comes the great Son of Sigfödur.
 The tree He goes towards easily.
 In the heart He will stand firm
 And keep his sword as well. There will his father be avenged.

R54 (H48)

Now comes Hlöðynjar's son,
 And Oðin's; he goes Towards the Wolf Road.
 He is fated to slay The Midguard serpent.
 The men will all Stand firm as he rides over their homes.
 Nine paces back steps Bur's son⁹⁹
 From the serpent below, Whose scorn is not named

R55 (H49)

The sun turns black, Ymir¹⁰⁰ sinks into the sea.

⁹⁹ Oðin

¹⁰⁰ the giant whose body makes up the earth

Out of the sky come The bright stars.
 Smoke rises up In this age,
 Like grey hair, Towards heaven itself.

R56

Fragmentary

R57 (H51)

Up she comes, Another companion,
 Another earth, Green again.
 Water falls The eagle flies over.
 Know you who has the power to fell The tree?

R58 (H52)

The gods meet On the level field
 And thunder rolls across the earth.

* *

The Mighty One's Ancient runes.

R59 (H53)

Accordingly, there will be Truly
 Games of gold Found in the grass

Which were played By the family of the gods.

R60 (H54)

Will unsown Fields wax full in fruit,

Ills will be bettered, Baldr will come.

Dwell they, Höðr & Baldr, In Hropts' hall

Easily. Know you one and all?

R61 (H55)

In that place kneels Hoenir With divining sticks,

And here will dwell The brothers,

In Wind World Know you one and all?

R62 (H56)

A hall stands firm; the sun Is less fair!

Thatched with gold Upon Gimléi.

In that place must Good people dwell

And across the ages aid And receive benefit.

R63 (H58)

There comes the dark Dragon flying

From down beneath,	From Niðafjöll,
Bearing in its feathers,	As it flies across,
Disgraced corpses.	Now must she sink. ¹⁰¹

Hauksbók

H1 (R1)

Listen -- Bid I all	Sacred kin
Greater and lesser	In Heimdallr:
The Father of the Slain wished	That I enumerate well
An ancient spell or tale of men,	The earliest that I can remember.

H2 (R2)

I remember giants	Of long ago and bear witness concerning them.
In their world I	Was brought up and kept.
Nine worlds I remember,	Nine branching roots
Of the famous perfect tree	Growing worlds beneath the soil.

¹⁰¹ There is a great deal of discussion as to whether “she” means the seeris or the dragon.

H3 (R3)

Mankind was created long ago In that place where Ymir dwelt.

There was neither sand Nor cold waves

No earth nor Eve Nor heaven.

Everything was gapping. There was no vegetation

H4 (R4)

First Bur's sons Raised land over

That from which famous Midgard was created.

The sun shined from the south Upon the hall of stone

In that ground where grew Green leeks.

H5 (R5)

The sun threw from the south Her companion the moon

Her arm within the grave mound¹⁰² Across the horizon.

The sun did not know The location of her halls.

The stars did not know Their positions.

The moon did not know The supernatural strength he possessed.

H6 (R6)

¹⁰² or partially within the grave – implies half way through rising or setting

In that place all the gods walked, At the council seat,
 The most holy gods And they guarded
 Night and waning moon. A name they gave
 Morning. They named The middle of the day
 And the midday meal and the evening. They counted the years.

H7 (R7)

The gods found At Ithavale
 Strength to throw. All were put to the test.
 Forges gave: Wealth was forged,
 Tongs were created, And tools were built.

H8 (R8)

They played at table games in the courtyard Merrily.
 Nothing was done Except with gold
 Until three came, Giant maidens,
 Very loathsome, Out of the realm of the giants.

H9 (R9)

In that place walk all the gods, At the council seat.

The most holy gods Keep watch throughout.
 Must the dwarves' A daughter create
 Out of Brimir's blood And out of Bláin's hollow bones.

H10 (R10)

In Mótsognir it happened The greatest came to pass.
 All of the dwarves, One Durin, and another
 Manlike. Many were made,
 Dwarves within soil As Durin told it.

H11 (R11-16)

Nýi¹⁰³ Niði¹⁰⁴ Norðri¹⁰⁵, Suðri¹⁰⁶,
 Austri¹⁰⁷, Vestri¹⁰⁸, Alþiófr¹⁰⁹, Dvalinn¹¹⁰,
 Naar and Nainn Nipingr, Dainn
 Ueggr, Gandálfr¹¹¹, Vindálfr¹¹², Þorinn,

¹⁰³ ("New Moon"),
¹⁰⁴ ("Waned Moon"),
¹⁰⁵ ("North")
¹⁰⁶ ("South")
¹⁰⁷ ("East")
¹⁰⁸ ("West")
¹⁰⁹ ("Great Thief")
¹¹⁰ ("Delayer")
¹¹¹ ("Staff Elf")
¹¹² ("Wind Elf")

H12 (r 11-16 b11-16)

Bívqrr, Bávqrr, Bǫmburr, Nóri,
 Án and Ánarr, Ái¹¹³, Miðvitnir¹¹⁴,
 þrar and Þorinn, Þrór, Lit¹¹⁵, and Vitr¹¹⁶,
 Nár¹¹⁷ and Nýráðr¹¹⁸. Now hold I the warriors
 Reginn and Ráðsviðr¹¹⁹. Rightly do I enumeraate them all.

H13 (R11-16)

Fíli, Kíli, Fundinn¹²⁰, Náli,
 Hepti¹²¹, Fíli, Hánarr and Svíurr,
 Naar and Nainn, Nipingr, Dáinn,
 Billigr, Brunnr¹²², Billdr and Buri,
 Frár, Hornbori Freg and Lóni¹²³.

H14 (R11-16)

¹¹³ (“Great Grandfather”)

¹¹⁴ (“Mead Wolf”)

¹¹⁵ (“Wise”)

¹¹⁶ (“Color”)

¹¹⁷ (“Corpse”)

¹¹⁸ (“New Council”)

¹¹⁹ (“Counsel-sharp”)

¹²⁰ (“Foundling”)

¹²¹ (“Haft”)

¹²² (“Burn, Spring, Well”)

¹²³ (“Sea-pool”)

Aurvangr¹²⁴, Iari, Eikinskialdi¹²⁵.
 A tale of Dwarves, Dvalinn¹²⁶ among the host,
 People and progeny Of Lofarr I will enumerate,
 Seeking To learn of the hall of stone,
 Muddy ground, seats Of gravel.

H15 (R11-16)

In that place stayed Draupnir And Dolgþraser,
 Har¹²⁷, Haugspori¹²⁸, Hlevang¹²⁹, Gloi¹³⁰,
 * *

Skirvir, Virvir, Skafith, Ai¹³¹,
 Alf¹³² and Yngvi, Eikinskjald¹³³.

H16 (R11-16)

He always remembers; Meanwhile humans flourish.
 A long list of descendants Has Lofar.

¹²⁴ (“Mud Field”)

¹²⁵ (“Oakenshield”)

¹²⁶ (Delayer)

¹²⁷ (“Grey hair”)

¹²⁸ (“Mound-river”)

¹²⁹ (“Lee-plain”)

¹³⁰ “Glow”

¹³¹ (“Great-grandfather”)

¹³² “(Elf)”

¹³³ (“Oakenshield”)

H17 (R17)

Until three came,	Giant maidens,
Benevolent and strong,	Gods in the house.
Found in a land	Little able
To keep Ash and Embla	From their fate.

H18 (R18)

Breath was not owned,	Voice was not held.
Blood, not voices	Nor good looks
Gave Odin; breath and	Voice gave Hœnir;
Blood gave Lóðurr,	And good looks.

H19 (R19)

I know an ash tree who stands firm	Named Yggdrasil
Whose grey hair flows	Shining like silver.
From thence comes the dew,	Which in the valley of the slain
Sands firm forever above the green,	Urðr's well.

H20 (R20)

Hence come maidens	Many know,
Three out of that sun	Who upon Yggdrasil stand firm.

Urðr ¹³⁴ one is named,	The second Verða ¹³⁵ .
Carved upon the wood,	The third is Sculd ¹³⁶ --
Who put down fate	Who determined life,
The fate of human children	According to the warriors.

H21 (R25)

In that place walked all the gods,
And kept watch over it. Most holy gods,
Who hold the sky, Destruction mix.
Of the giant's tribe, Od is given a maiden in marriage

H22 (R26)

Thor was in that place Swollen with rage.
He seldom sits When he hears such news.
He goes on your Word & sea
Tale; his supernatural strength ordains his fate,

 You who have some power to make things happen.

¹³⁴ (“dire fate”)

135 (“Become”)

136 (“Shall”)

136 (“Shall”)

H23 (R27)

Knows she Heimdall.	Silences she the host of warriors.
Below that bright	Sacred tree
A waterfall pours down	A mighty stream
Out of that tree, Valfǫðr's	Knowledge, in that certain place.

H24 (R39)

In the east sat the old woman,	In Járnsvið ¹³⁷ ,
And fathered ¹³⁸ there	Fenris' kin.
It is fated that	One such wolf
Will eat ¹³⁹ the earth	In the world of the trolls.

H25 (R40)

Frightened men,	He eats their fair flesh.
Red are the god's seats	With their red blood.
The sun shines black	Across all;
It is fated.	Know you one and all?

¹³⁷ Iron Wood

¹³⁸ This gender discrepancy may be accounted for by remembering Loki's ability to shift both his shape and his sex.

Loki also take the shape of a female giant when s/he thwarts Frigg's plan to retrieve Balder from Hel.

¹³⁹ Literally "tongue"

H26 (R21)

Remember that war, The earliest in the world,
 When Gulveig Was pierced with spears from all sides
 And in Odin's hall She burned.
 Thrice burned, Thrice witnessed,
 Frequently, repeatedly, Yet she lives.

H27 (R22)

Heiðr¹⁴⁰ was she named. Always she came to houses,
 And the sorceress prophesied with ease. Knew she magic spirits.
 She always bewitched; she knew how to Bewitch with a trance.
 Always delights, This young woman, in ill¹⁴¹

H28 (R23)

In that place walked all the gods, The most holy gods,
 At the council seat, And attended to
 Whether the gods must Pay tribute or compensation
 Or whether all the gods might Lay claim to compensation.

¹⁴⁰ "Bright," also "Witch"

¹⁴¹ OR This ill woman

H29 (R24)

Odin let fly And threw over the troops.
 He caused a war, Before others in the world.
 The wall is destroyed, The castle of the gods.
 This might proclaim the Vanir's death; The seeress is spurned.

H30 (R34)

Here kneels Vála Weaving a spell,
 Holding steady. Like Loki he looks.

* *

* *

In that place resides Sigyn, Silent concerning her husband,
 Captive in the ketil-grove. Know you one and all?

H31 (R43)

Garm bays loudly Before Gnipahelli.
 He will break his fetters And run free.
 I know much And can see more, warriors,
 The Ragnarök Of the mighty gods.

H32 (R41)

He sits upon the mound & strikes his harp,
 The giant's watchman Happy Egber.
 A Golden bird In the singing tree,
 She, fair and red, Saw he who is called Fjalarr

H33 (R42)

Gold to the gods Gullinkambi
 continued to watch At Herjaföðrs
 And another crows Beneath the earth
 Truly she is red From soot in Hel.

H34 (R37)

She stood at a sea, So far from the sun,
 On Corpse-strand With its doors facing north.
 Poison falls, slaying The people
 Underground; Its walls writhe with black snakes.

H35 (R38)

There she waded Through the roiling stream
 With murderers, Oath-breakers, & outlaws¹⁴²

¹⁴²“wolves”

& men who seduced Other men's wives.

There at the warrior kinsman's grave mound Nithhhogg eats the dead,

The wolf rends them. Know you one and all?

H36 (=H31) (R43)

Garm bays loudly Before Gnipahelli.

He will break his fetters And run free.

I know much And can see more,

The Ragnarök Of the mighty gods.

H37 (R44)

Brother must fight

Must sister's young Kin bonds destroy.

The world will be harsh. High judgment will be severe.

Man age, fated age¹⁴³, Shield age will be cleaved.

Wind age, wolf age, Throw yourself before the sea age.

The ground calls – flight is given.

Man remembers only Other *pyrma*.

H38 (R45)

¹⁴³ Literally *skulum*: "shall, must, ought"

Like Mims' son Offspring of the dispencer of fate
 Calls forward Gjallarhorni¹⁴⁴
 Loud blows Heimdall's Horn in the sky
 Oðin speaks with Mim's head.

H39 (R46)

Yggdrasil trembles; The ash tree¹⁴⁵ groans
 Ymir shakes the tree And the giant is free
 All are frightened Upon Hel's road
 Until Surt and his kin Cross that sea

H40 (R50)

Who is among the Æsir? Who is among the Alfs¹⁴⁶?
 All the world's giants clash; The gods hold an ðing.
 Stone dwarfs Before the stone doorway,
 Masters of the battle mountain. Know you one and all?

H41 (R47)

Fragmentary

¹⁴⁴“horn's call”

¹⁴⁵Or spear

¹⁴⁶elves

H42 (R48)

Hrym comes from the east,	His shield held before him.
Jormandgand is shown,	In giant rage,
Snaking through the waves,	And the hawk cries
Rending fallen corpses;	Naglfar ¹⁴⁷ breaks loose.

H43 (R49 b51)

Sailing from the east	Will come Muspell,
Across the sea,	And Loki steers,
Journeying	Among all the wolves
Which the brother	Of Býleipts fathered.

H44 (R51)

Surt comes from the south	With the destroyer of branches;
His sword gleams	Like the sun.
The mountains shake	And the giantess roves.
Men go to Hel's hall	And heaven is cloven.

H45 (R52)

¹⁴⁷“Nail Malice”

There for Hlin more grief is ahead.
 Oðin travels further By the wolf road;
 The slayer of Beli goes towards Surt.
 Friggjar remembers where her Delight will fall.

H46

Fragmentary

H47

Great sky, above Land and dirt,
 The serpent's jaws gape open to heaven.
 Must Oðin's son Meet the serpent;
 Must he¹⁴⁸ Fight the wolf.

H48

Fragmentary

H49 (R55)

The sun turns black, Ymir sinks into the sea,
 Out of the sky come The bright stars,

¹⁴⁸Oðin

Smoke rises up In this age,
 Like grey hair, Towards heaven itself.

H50

Fragmentary.

H51 (R57)

Up she comes, Another companion,
 Another earth, Green again.
 Water falls, The eagle flies over.
 Know you who has the power to fell The tree?

H52 (R58)

The gods meet On level field
 And a noise thunders across the earth. They speak of Jormangand
 And remember The supernatural strength
 Of the Mighty One's Ancient runes.

H53 (R9)

In that place will the gods Truly

Find games of gold In the grass
Which were played In the family of the gods

H54 (R60)

Will unsown Fields wax in fruit.
Remember bettered ills; Remember Balder's coming.
Dwell they, Höðr & Baldr, In Hropts' hall
Easily. Know you one and all?

H55 (R61)

In that place kneels Hoenir, With divining sticks.
And will they dwell, The brothers,
In Wind world. Know you one and all?

H56 (R62)

A hall stands firm; the sun Is less fair!
Thatched with gold Upon Gimléi.
In that place must Good people dwell
And across the ages aid And benefit receive.

H57

To this place comes the power Of the god
 Strong from the south Who rides over.

H58 (R63)

There comes the dark dragon flying
 From down beneath, from Niðafjöll,
 Bearing itself on feathers, as it flies across,
 Of disgraced corpses. Now she remembers sinking.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ There is a great deal of discussion in the literature as to whether “she” means the seeris or the dragon